

Golden Sun: the First Adventure

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Summary: Isaac and Garet are thrust headlong into a quest to save the world from Alchemy. Rated T for fantasy violence and mild swearing. Novelization of the first game. Constructive criticism, please.

***Chapter 1*: Prologue, the Boulder**

A crash of thunder, fat drops of rain pounding on the thatched hay roof of a cottage near the top of a hill in a little village called Vale. There was a heavy pounding on the door that cut through the darkness of a sleeping boy's mind. The boy pulled his blanket more tightly over his head, trying to block out the frantic voices from downstairs.

There was a running of footsteps and a rather plump woman ran up to the boy's bed. "Isaac! Wake up!" she shouted shrilly over another crash of thunder. The boy, Isaac, mumbled something about a few more minutes, but his mother grabbed him by the arm. "Please, dear, wake up! The Mt. Aleph Boulder is about to fall!" Isaac's blue eyes shot open as the weight of those words fell on his ears. The Mt. Aleph Boulder had stood at the peak of that mountain for as long as he could remember. It had always been the joke of Vale that it was a wonder it hadn't fallen. Needless to say, Isaac wasn't exactly laughing.

Isaac, suddenly breathing heavily, swung his feet over the side of his bed. He was fully dressed in the work clothes he'd wore the day before. "Are you sure!" he asked, terrified. Dora, his mother, nodded frantically. His heart beating against his ribcage, his hands shaking, he grabbed his boots from under his bed. After he slipped them on, he moved to run past his mother, but she stopped him.

"Wait, your tunic!" she cried, and raised her hand to the brown leather cape on the opposite wall above the blond-haired boy's bed. Blue rings of energy enveloped the woman from her feet to over her head, and another hand, this one large, glowing and white, grabbed the tunic and pulled it down from the hook. "Here, hold still," she fussed over her

son, draping the cape over his shoulders. "It won't do for you to catch a death of cold," Dora murmured, pulling the attached hood over her head.

"Mum! It probably won't do to catch my death of *death*, either!" complained Isaac, though he didn't fight against her. Once she'd stepped back, he reached out and grabbed his machete. The local monsters were probably riled up from the storm. "Does Dad know?" he asked as they ran across the room and toward the stairs.

"Of course he does!" Dora snapped, turning to her son just as they reached the landing of the staircase. Isaac was strapping his machete to his belt. "Now, do you have everything?" she asked.

Isaac looked over his shoulder at the books and toys he'd collected over the years, then back to his mother, nodding. "Yeah, everything I need." Dora beamed.

"Very good. Remember, a lost possession can be replaced, a lost life cannot." Isaac refrained from rolling his eyes, having heard the same story he didn't know *how* many times a week. They ran downstairs, where Isaac's father, Kyle, was pulling on his own tunic. Kyle, a tall, broad-shouldered man, looked up as Dora and Isaac came down.

"Come on, Dora!" he yelled, as a flash of lightning illuminated the room for a fraction of a second, making his features look ghostly white, even if he was in shock. "The Boulder's been leaning in this direction for some time now." Turning, the man pulled his hood up and ran towards the door. Dora and Isaac started running to follow, Dora grabbing her own tunic and was in the process of following after her husband, when Kyle opened the door, a gust of wind blowing out the candle that was sitting on the dining

table. Isaac and his mother blinked at the sudden darkness that had enveloped them, glancing at each other, before shaking it off and running after Kyle.

Clutching her tunic around herself and pulling her hood over her auburn hair, the woman ran out of her front door and around the cottage, catching sight of Kyle, who stood looking up towards the waterfall, where a line of four men stood, watching the peak of Mt. Aleph. Isaac looked up as well, and gasped. On the very top, the Boulder sat, the battering wind making it lean ever so slightly in their direction. "Kyle!" yelled Dora, who'd torn her own eyes from the massive stone, looking to her husband. "Will they be able to stop it?"

Kyle pulled his arm up, blocking the rain from splashing into his eyes as he squinted up at the people. "I don't think so," he replied gravely, turning to his wife and son with a frown. "Not for long, anyway. Hopefully they'll be able to slow it down long enough to get the villagers to safety." Isaac looked away from the Boulder that was balanced so precariously on the peak himself with some difficulty. "You two," said Kyle firmly to Dora and their son, "run to the plaza and take refuge there." The man turned and began running up the hill.

"Wait!" cried Dora, grabbing her husband by the arm. "Aren't you coming?"

Kyle turned back to Dora, and shook his head. "I have to get the other villagers to safety!" he yelled as a crash of thunder nearly drowned out his voice.

There was a very brief moment's pause as Isaac watched his mother and father stare at each other. "Let me come with you!" yelled Dora, and Kyle blinked, surprised at her.

"And leave Isaac alone?" he demanded.

"Isaac's old enough to get to the village just fine on his own!" snapped Dora hotly, looking to Isaac, who'd been quiet all this time. "Aren't you?"

Isaac glanced over his shoulder again down the hill. The village wasn't all that big, really. He only needed to travel down the stairs that had been built into the cliffs that made up the various levels of Vale, and he'd reach the plaza. Turning back to his parents, he nodded. Dora, satisfied, turned to her husband, who was watching Isaac. With a heavy sigh, he nodded. "Be careful!" he yelled to Isaac, and both of them turned and ran up the hill.

Isaac, breathing heavily again, turned in the opposite direction, toward the stairs that lead down. Just as he reached them, however, there was a crash, and the cliff gave way, destroying the stairs. Backpedalling, Isaac slipped in the wet mud and landed heavily on his rear, muck already seeping into his trousers. He weighed his options; Isaac could keep trying to go south, down the rockslide, but that was an eight foot drop at least, and he wasn't exactly the most coordinated of children. He could fall and land on the large rocks and get a concussion, or worse.

There was nothing for it. Isaac climbed back to his feet, brushing at the back of his pants in vain before running in the direction his parents had gone. Kyle must have lead the mayor and his family away. His best friend Gareth's house, which rested on the level above his own, was empty and still, the door wide open. There was a wide trail from the doorstep that cut through the mud and around to the back of the house, as if someone had dragged a heavy trunk across the ground.

Sure enough, as Isaac hurried around, there was Gareth himself, heaving in vain on a rope attached to the heavy box of his possessions. A shock of high-spiked, red hair was drooping ever so slightly onto the other boy's forehead, his hood apparently having blown off. "Garet!" shouted Isaac, grabbing his friend by the elbow, though his next words were lost as another crash of thunder boomed.

Garet tugged his arm out of Isaac's grip as he gave a mighty heave of his trunk, which had stuck itself in the mud, and wasn't budging. "Get off, Isaac, I have to save my stuff!" yelled the boy stubbornly. Even if Gareth was a little bigger than average, he still didn't have the strength yet to pull the box out of the muck.

"Garet!" shouted Isaac again, irritated at his friend's pigheadedness. "Leave it! If you stay here you-" Yet another crash of thunder, and this time Gareth twitched, turning to Isaac with a scared expression, looking toward the peak.

"Right!" he said, throwing the rope to the ground. "You're right, I..." Isaac shook his head, grabbing Gareth by the forearm and pulling him along. "Wait, we can't go south?" asked Gareth loudly, holding his tunic tightly to his shoulders.

"The stairs in front of my house are blocked by a landslide!" explained Isaac, deciding not to mention that if Gareth wanted to go south, it was odd that he was trying to drag his trunk up the hill. Isaac could only guess that the slightly older boy was following his family, who were likely already at the plaza by now.

Ignoring the stairs that lead to the Great Healer's Sanctum, the boys ran across the bridge instead, both of them keeping their eyes ahead and not to their right, which was in the direction of the waterfall, where four men stood with

their arms up, facing the mountain, in the river that the boulder was sure to fall. Suddenly, with a loud crash that shook the very ground on which they stood, the Boulder itself, at least twice as large as Isaac's house, landed in front of the four men, whose bodies glowed, brilliant blue rings surrounding their bodies. All four of them were pushed back, as the Boulder collided with an invisible barrier.

With a great deal of effort, the men, two of which were Healers studying under the Great Healer, held the massive rock in place. "We can't hold it!" yelled a man, turning to his comrades.

"We have to!" yelled back one of the healers. All their backs were to Isaac and Gareth, both of them staring transfixed, terrified, at the men. "The other villagers have to be evacuated!"

One man glanced over his shoulder, nearly losing his concentration as he saw the two boys. "Isaac, Gareth!" he yelled. "Run!"

Isaac blinked, grabbing Gareth again. The boys resumed running, reaching the other end of the bridge and continuing south, down the hill. Suddenly, with another crash, the cliff to their right gave way, and Gareth grabbed Isaac by the tunic, using fairly considerable strength to pull the smaller boy out of harm's way. Both of them were panting. "Mars," gasped Gareth, helping Isaac up. The blond-haired boy was breathing heavily, which was only slightly to do with his run to this point.

"I owe you," he said, and Gareth only nodded, both of them turning to run down the side path that lead to the old man Kraden's house. Running past another landslide that blocked off the path to the cottage (Isaac hoping Kraden had

escaped in time), they both froze as they saw a man lying still next to the fence that blocked off the path that lead to an old cave that they had been forbidden to enter. The fence itself was smashed; a large, albeit not huge, boulder lay next to the man.

The boy ran up to him, Isaac pressing two fingers to his neck. He had a pulse, which was fast and pounding. Gareth shook the man, who stirred, and groaned. "I... I don't think I'm gonna make it... Monsters... From the cave. The fence..." Isaac and Gareth exchanged terrified looks. The smaller boy looked the man over. He was soaked to the bone, but oddly, he didn't have a scratch on him. "I'm gonna be fodder for creatures to snack on," the man was whining, clutching his chest dramatically.

"You're not hurt!" yelled Isaac, frustrated. The man continued for a moment before blinking, looking down at his body and feeling himself.

"Wait... You're right!" He sprung up, patting along his legs, arms, and chest. "I'm fine!" The man, looking completely embarrassed, cleared his throat. "I was serious about the monsters, though. They've been riled something fierce by the storm." As the man turned and started walking, he looked to Isaac. "You won't... Tell anyone I..." Isaac shook his head just as thunder crashed again, and the man jumped, running off like his shirt was on fire.

Both boys slapped their palms to their forehead, and ran after the man. Suddenly, a large, red rat leaped out of the bushes at Gareth, who couldn't reach his machete in time. Isaac, the smaller and quicker boy, ran forward, chopping the massive rodent out the air, where it fell heavily to the ground, bleeding. The boys glanced at each other. Gareth, coughing, asked, "Debt repaid?"

Isaac, looking down at the dead creature, nodded, and they both ran off again, emerging on the other side of the landslide and running down the hill toward where Jenna, Isaac's other friend, lived. Jenna's house had a porch that extended out into the river, which was now white rapids of water. The boys ran around the house, catching sight of Isaac and Jenna's parents and Jenna herself, standing on the porch. Kyle held a rope, swinging it around his head. "Felix, try to catch this!" he yelled, and threw it out. Looking out to where it landed, Isaac and Gareth gasped. Holding for dear life to a tree branch that had lodged itself in the rocks was Jenna's brother, Felix.

Felix lunged at the end of the rope with one hand, the other gripping onto the branch, but he couldn't reach it. Sobbing, Felix wrapped his arms around the wooden branch. "It won't reach!" yelled Jenna, and as Isaac looked at her, he saw that her eyes were streaming with tears even in the rain. Suddenly, a fork of the branch snapped, and Felix was submerged. Everyone let out a yell of shock, and Jenna actually lunged at the water, stopped by her mother. "Felix!" she screamed.

By what Isaac could only guess was sheer luck, the older boy pulled his brown-haired head over the surface of the water, pulling in a deep gasp, and wrapped his arms, and hopefully his legs as well, around the branch. Jenna's sobs only became more pronounced. Dora turned to her. "Jenna, we have to get help." Kyle pulled the rope in, looking grave.

"We need someone with Psynergy," he said loudly. "I'm tapped out." Psynergy was what Adepts used to perform certain abilities, like Dora's Catch.

"So am I, so I can't even use Catch," said Dora. The other two adults, Jenna and Felix's parents, nodded as well. Isaac's

mother looked back to Jenna. "Come on, we can't do anything for him!" Hesitantly, Jenna looked to her parents, who nodded, and followed Dora as they went through the house and out the front door, spotting Isaac and Gareth. Dora blinked at them. "Did you see all that?" Isaac nodded, glancing to Felix, then back to his mother and Jenna. Dora smiled. "Jenna, you go with Gareth and Isaac, then."

The girl looked to the boys, her face shining in a mixture of rain and tears. She nodded. The three children turned as Dora yelled after them about going back north to find someone to help as well. As they passed, Isaac yelled to Felix. "We're gonna find help! Don't give up hope!" Felix looked at them, and though he was sobbing and holding on for dear life, he nodded.

Climbing the stairs to the south, the three children ran across the bridge above the river that lead into a second waterfall into the plaza. It was a good twenty foot drop, and Felix was probably not going to survive that if he wasn't saved, and soon. It took less than a minute to reach the plaza, the boys and Jenna rushing past everyone to the center square that held the massive Psynergy Stone, a glowing, blue, six foot tall gem that allowed Adepts to regain their Psynergy. Everyone in the village, save for Kraden, whom didn't seem to be present at the moment, were Adepts. The mayor, Gareth's grandfather, was talking to two burly men.

"Go and help the elders with the Boulder! They need all the help they can get." The men, looking grave and not saying a word, turned and left. A third man was standing on the island in the middle of the small pond, his hands pressed to the Psynergy stone. Jenna, Isaac and Gareth ran up to the mayor, who turned. "Jenna, what-"

"Felix is in trouble!" shouted Jenna, pointing up at the waterfall. The man on the stone looked over his shoulder.

"Oh, Mars," gasped the old man, clutching his heart, then turned to the man on the Stone. Pulling his hands from the gem, he leaped down in front of the three children.

"I can help," he said.

"Very well," said the mayor, patting the large man on the shoulder. "Go, then, and hurry!"

The three children ran, the man who'd just charged up on their heels. A pair of screeching rats swooped down on them, but Isaac and Gareth, who were leading, simply chopped their wings off in turn, informing the man to save his energy.

As they crossed the bridge, Dora ran up to them. "There no time to waste!" she yelled, pointing to Felix, whose situation hadn't improved, but it at least hadn't gotten any worse. "Here!" Dora shoved a chain of green beads into the man's hands, and he nodded, walking to the bank and holding out his hand.

Boom.

Everyone froze, their heads popping upwards toward the mountain peak.

Boom.

Isaac, Gareth, Jenna, Jenna's parents, Dora, Kyle, Felix, and the Adept, who still had his arm extended, stood transfixed as the massive Mt. Aleph Boulder seemed to hover in the air, feet above where Kyle and Jenna's parents were standing, Isaac's father extending both arms as feeble rings surrounded his body. Dora was running toward her husband,

Garet was holding Jenna back, Isaac could see the silhouette of the boulder reflected in Felix's brown eyes, and the Adept that had followed them still hadn't put down his hand.

Isaac closed his eyes.

When he opened them, he was looking down at his feet, his arms were clutched tightly to his head, covering his ears. Even when he lowered them, there was still a deafening ringing as he looked up. Half of Jenna's house was gone. Her parents were gone. Kyle was gone. And as Isaac turned, he saw that the branch that Felix had been clutching was gone, too.

"Dad," breathed Isaac. Garet turned to look at his friend.

"Dad," Isaac said again as he ran, past the Adept who was now clutching his mangled leg, running around and across the bridge. "Dad!" His dad was only washing down the river! If Isaac could run fast enough, he could catch up, and possibly find Jenna's family, too! But something made him freeze, sliding across the mud to a stop.

"All dead," said a deep, soft voice that was still heard even through the howling winds. The voice sent a shiver down Isaac's spine. "Only we two survived..."

"Such fury," said another, female voice. "How could we have known? Was that switch the trap?"

Isaac looked up as two people stepped up to the cliff above, not noticing him. The man had blue skin and hair, a long sword strapped to his belt, while the woman had a face of the palest white, with red lips and eyelids. The man nodded. "But to think it would conjure a storm so powerful!" Isaac felt a twinge of anger ripple his stomach. It was them!

"Another demonstration of the power of Alchemy," said the woman, twirling her large scythe nonchalantly in her hand and shrugging dismissively.

"Regardless," said the man, turning away from the mountain peak to look at the woman, "we must not fail the next time we challenge Sol Sanctum."

"Indeed," agreed the woman, shouldering her staff with a nasty smirk. "Next time we shall certain-"

"*Isaac, wait!*" yelled a voice behind Isaac, who turned, and so did the people, to see Gareth running up to him. "You know, it's times like these when men have to-" Gareth froze, blinking up at the people on the cliff, who looked right back at Isaac and Gareth with cold gazes.

"How much did you hear?" demanded the man with blue skin.

Isaac felt anger teat through him again, but he stood defiant. "Nothing."

"Do not lie!" screeched the woman, dropping down from the cliff. "You must forget what you heard." The man dropped down after her, drawing his sword.

Garet and Isaac drew their machetes, but they both knew it was no use. "Don't worry," muttered the man, and he extended his hand, pointing his palm at the boys, "we'll help you forget." Red rings surrounded the two people, and the sheer power that they gave off nearly blew the two boys off their feet.

The woman closed the distance between herself and Gareth, the boy lifting his machete, but she knocked it away, spinning her scythe and slamming the end without the

blade into his face. The boy fell, and tried to sit up, only to receive a blow from the same end of the woman's weapon to the forehead, where he fell back, unconscious.

"Garet!" shouted Isaac, but there was a heat billowing from beneath him. It built hotter and hotter, until a massive, hot explosion blew him off his feet. The back of his head slammed into the cliff, and he slid to the ground.

"Nice shot, Saturos," said the woman's voice.

"He's not dead," replied the man. Isaac, his vision starting to fade, heard footsteps getting closer. "With any luck, they'll have forgotten this whole thing by morning."

And as soon as those words were out of his lips, the man and his partner had leaped away, leaving Isaac to fall down, deep into darkness.

***Chapter 2*: Chapter 1, Three Years Later**

Author's Note: Alright, something of note here. This chapter is **long**. Not counting the Author's Note, it's almost **five times longer than the prologue**. I had originally split the entire Sol Sanctum segment into three chapters. But, I feel like it should all be together just to get it all out of the way in one go. So, here it is, all together for your enjoyment. Please, *please*, give me some constructive criticism. And don't worry, I don't think the chapters following this one will be quite as long as this one once Garet and Isaac actually leave Vale.

Three Years Later

It was the brightest, clearest fall morning that Vale had had in over a year, now. The sun beat down on the men and women as they rebuilt the houses that had been destroyed on that fateful day three years previously. The landslides had only recently been cleared and the stairs that allowed the villagers to travel up and down the levels of the town had been rebuilt just last month. The trees around them were of warm golds and reds. Even with Psynergy, gathering supplies took a long time, and using them for efforts to rebuild was a task in and of itself.

"Good morning," said Jenna, smiling to a woman, who paused a moment to smile back. Jenna had grown in three years, now holding a staff a little shorter than she was tall that had a wooden crescent moon on one end of it.

"Ah, Jenna," said the woman, inclining her head a fraction so as to keep from tipping over the urn she was carrying on her

head. "How are you?" she asked, her eyes becoming slightly concerned as she stared at Jenna's face.

"I'm fine, ma'am," replied the girl a bit more firmly than she'd intended, brushing her red bangs out of her brown eyes. "I'm heading off to visit Isaac and Gareth."

"Oh, good." The woman cleared her throat and adjusted the urn, nodding. "Don't let me keep you, then. Have a good day." Jenna gave a respectful bow, and the two parted ways, Jenna heading up the stairs.

"Do you have the roof fixed yet, Isaac?" called a towheaded woman standing in front of a cottage in front of the stairs' landing. Jenna paused a moment, looking up at the roof and bringing her hand up to block the morning sun.

"Almost done, mum!" called down Isaac, the edge of the roof hiding him from view. "I have to lace these bits of hay together." Dora's roof had gotten several holes in it and they'd had to use pieces of wood to block the rain for a few months while they'd helped rebuild the rest of the town.

"Okay, dear, just tell me when I can come up!" replied Dora, adjusting her apron, and Jenna smiled, walking around the house and getting behind it to walk further north. Once she'd climbed the next set of stairs, she stepped up to the next house to knock on the door when she heard a loud yell.

"Haah!" Jenna jumped, turning and peeking around the corner before stifling a giggle. Gareth stood with a deep frown in front of a large stone that was taller than he was, and that was saying something. Not counting his red hair which he'd spiked at least four inches from his scalp, Gareth had grown even taller than Jenna or Isaac. The teenager lifted both hands, and blue rings appeared around his body. With sweat dripping down his brow, his hands began to glow. "Haah!" he

shouted again, and a massive, ghostly white hand appeared, pressing against the rock. With what looked like a massive effort of Gareth's part, the rock began to slide away from the teenager. Jenna saw several pretty flowers getting crushed under the weight of the rock.

"Training hard there, Gareth?" asked Jenna as she stepped up to her friend. Gareth jumped, and lost his concentration, the ghostly hand disappearing. "You'd figure that you'd be able to lift it and throw it into the river from here by now." The taller boy blushed.

"You know Isaac and I haven't had a lot of time to train." Gareth lifted his large arms to cross over his chest. "What with all the rebuilding, and... Stuff. We've barely had free time for the last three years..."

"I wasn't talking about Psynergy, Gareth," said Jenna, placing her hands on her hips and smirking at him. "You're built like a barn."

Gareth's face became about a shade darker than his hair. "Well, that's what happens when you carry all that... Wood around and... Rocks." Jenna giggled, walking over and cuffing the larger boy on the shoulder.

"You put your heart into your work and your training," she said, looking at the stone Gareth had moved. Walking slowly up to the flower garden, Jenna leaned her staff against the stone. "Hey... What happened to you and Isaac?" she asked, glancing to Gareth, who blinked, looking confused. "Three years ago, I mean. Isn't that why you two have been training so hard in your free time?"

Gareth blinked again, then looked away, rubbing the back of his head. "Uh, well... I..."

"I appreciate your concern," said Jenna, and she looked back at the rock, rubbing over the mossy surface. "But my family's never coming back, and neither is Isaac's father..." Gareth looked back at his friend, his brows furrowing. "I just want to forget that day," Jenna continued softly, her hand gripping into the grooves of the stone as her eyes became slightly misty. "I wish everyone else would..." Jenna took in a long breath. "Anyway, we'd better pick up Isaac and-" She froze, blinking at Gareth, for the taller boy had started saying something, but cut off. He blushed, closing his open mouth and looked away. "What?"

"N-nothing," deflected Gareth said, suddenly becoming very interested in a bird that had landed on top of the rock he had been training with.

"You were about to say something," pressed Jenna, her head tilted slightly as she stared at him.

Gareth shook his head. "It's nothing," he repeated. Jenna frowned, her hands placing themselves on her hips again as she watched him.

After a few moments of silence between the two of them, Jenna grabbed her staff and turned her back on him with a scoff, crossing her arms over her chest. "Don't be so weird..." Gareth blinked, watching as her purple cape swayed slightly in the breeze. "Whatever..."

"Jenna..." Gareth stepped forward, reaching out to her. "Are you mad at me?"

Jenna tapped a frustrated finger on the crescent of her staff, shaking her head. "It doesn't matter," she mumbled. It was Gareth's turn to frown, looking concerned. When he'd opened his mouth, Jenna said, "Come on!"

Blinking, Gareth's mouth hanging open slightly, he tilted his head, looking very much like a confused puppy. "Huh?"

Jenna turned back to Gareth impatiently. "We have to go pick up Isaac, remember?" She rolled her eyes and began walking around Gareth's house.

"But, Jenna..." Jenna let out an exasperated sigh, turning to Gareth and frowning. He blanched, and the message seemed to finally sink in. Gareth turned, grabbing up the short sword he'd been saving up his allowance to buy and strapped it to his belt as he followed Jenna.

Back down the stairs, and south toward Isaac's house, the two of them paused just before turning the corner to the front. Or at least, Jenna paused and Gareth ran into her. The two whispered at each other for a moment before going silent as Isaac's long, yellow scarf billowed above their heads from the roof. They could see their friend's hair over the edge of the thatched hay roof and the blue glow of Psynergy as he picked up and made a pile of tied hay float over to one of the holes, lacing it over the hole in his roof.

Isaac did this two more times and called down to his mother. "Alright, come on up and check it out!" Jenna and Gareth peeked around the corner as Dora, who was a bit thinner than she had been three years ago, climbed up the ladder that leaned against the outside wall.

"Very good, Isaac," they heard Dora say. "Nicely patched and strong enough to keep the rain from drenching us at night..." Jenna pressed her finger to her lips as she walked slowly toward the ladder, Gareth following behind her. "You're all done," continued Dora, a patting noise coming to their ears as she seemed to test the patches. "So reliable." Jenna paused as Dora's voice became softer. "Just like your father."

On the roof, Isaac blinked his blue eyes, sitting back on his legs as he looked up at his mother. Dora smiled warmly down at her son, and he let out a soft sigh. "I miss him," he said, tugging on the yellow scarf around his neck. On his back was a short sword much like Gareth's

"I thought you might." Dora stepped over to Isaac and kneeled down, placing a warm hand on his shoulder. Isaac hadn't grown quite as much as Gareth in terms of muscle mass, but he still had a fair bit of strength to his arms. "It's why you and Gareth have been studying Psynergy so hard these last few years, isn't it?" Isaac stared at his mother for a few moments, then, with a small twitch of his head, he looked away.

"I just feel like... If I were stronger then, I'd have... And Jenna's parents, and Felix... And Dad..." Isaac gripped his hands on his knees, and Dora pulled him into a tight, warm hug. After a moment, the teenager returned it, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"You mustn't blame yourself dear. I was devastated when Kyle died..." She leaned down, kissing his head. "I felt all alone." Isaac looked up into the eyes of his mother, tears beginning to form. "It's taken some time... But I'm better now. I have you, after all." She ran a thumb under his eyes to wipe away the tears. "Almost seventeen, and so much like your father when he was young. I look forward to seeing where life takes you."

Isaac smiled, wiping away the tears and nodding. "Thanks, mum." As Dora stood up, pulling her son with her, Jenna climbed up the ladder, poking her head up.

"Ma'am!" she shouted, and the two on the roof jumped slightly, looking to the girl. Jenna gave no indication that

she'd heard anything, but Isaac coughed and turned his head to look down at the patch he'd made.

Dora, meanwhile, looked slightly flustered. "Oh, Jenna! Good morning!" A small pink tint was traveling slowly up her cheeks as she and her son exchanged a look as the unmistakable spiked red hair bobbed up from the edge of the roof. "Oh! And Gareth, too." Gareth was blushing a bit darker than Dora, wringing his hands once he'd straightened up. There was an uncomfortable silence, broken up only by the tweeting of birds in the distance. "So!" said Dora. "Where are you planning on going today?"

Gareth, who looked glad for a subject away from what he and Jenna had heard, replied. "We're going to Mt. Aleph, with Kraden." Dora's eyebrows raised, and she looked between the three of them in turn.

"Mountain climbing with Kraden?" she asked. The three teens nodded. Dora's arms crossed over her chest and she let out a soft huff. "Children and their games..."

"No, it's part of our studies!" said Jenna quickly.

"Yeah, you know," added Isaac, "alchemy."

"Ah, yes," murmured Dora, fiddling with the length of greed beads around her wrist. "Alchemy... The foundation of all Psynergy..." Isaac's mother looked at all three of them in turn again. "And you three know Mt. Aleph is the greatest source of Alchemy." The three exchanged glances, and nodded again. "They say Kraden's the best teacher around, you know." Dora turned her back on them and walked up the slight incline of her roof, looking up at the peak of Mt. Aleph. "I have to wonder what use it all is," she mused. Turning back to Isaac, she frowned. "I'd *prefer* to see my son grow up to be a happy, normal man."

Isaac blushed, but didn't look away. "I still want to go," he said firmly, and Dora laughed.

"You'd probably go even if I told you not to." Dora suddenly frowned. "You're as stubborn as your father!" She stamped her foot down, but suddenly, she lost her footing and fell backwards onto the other side of the roof, her arms flailing.

"Mum!" shouted Isaac, but it was Gareth who lunged forward.

"Be careful ma'-" Suddenly, Gareth's foot sunk into the hole Isaac had just patch up, and he fell up to his knee.

With what looked like a bit of effort, Dora pulled herself up from the other side of the roof, laughing giddily. "Well, that was exciting!" Not noticing Gareth, who was trying in vain to free his foot, Dora climbed to her feet and stepped up to Isaac. "Sorry I scared you." She patted him on the shoulder and looked to Jenna, who was staring with her hand over her mouth. "What...?" Dora turned, and finally spotted Gareth, whose face was now the same color as his hair. "Well!" The woman placed her hands on her hips, looking sternly down at Gareth, who blanched.

"I-I'm sorry ma'am, let me just..." The larger boy grabbed his leg behind the knee and pulled with all his might, getting to his feet and taking a few steps backwards.

"Gareth, wait!" yelled Jenna, but too late. The redhead's other leg sunk into the other hole Isaac had patched up.

"Oh, Venus," Isaac's hand slapped into his face, while Jenna turned away, trying to hold in her laughter. Dora, meanwhile, threw her hands up in frustration.

"Oh, nevermind!" Dora's arms crossed over her chest again and she heaved out a deep sigh, looking to Isaac. "Help your

friend out of the hole and get moving. I'm sure you don't want to keep Kraden waiting." Isaac looked up at his mother, who was smiling with a soft twinkle in her eye. "Besides, if Gareth stays here any longer, he might cave in my whole roof!" Isaac and Jenna walked over to Gareth, grabbing each arm and heaving him up out of the hole. "You can fix it up tomorrow, Isaac," she said as the three teenagers started climbing down. "Or I might ask one of the Elder's apprentices to help me later." Once they were all off the roof, Dora smiled to her son while Gareth's face hadn't lightened up.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Jenna, once her hysteria had died down.

"Please, call me Dora," said Isaac's mother, smiling warmly to the girl.

Jenna nodded, and turned away, the other two following her as they started walking up the hill. Once they were out of sight, Isaac punched Gareth in the shoulder. "Why'd you have to break the roof again?" he demanded, though he didn't look as angry as he sounded. "I'd been working all morning on that!"

"S-sorry, buddy," stammered Gareth. "Hay roofs aren't meant for people to be jumping on..." Jenna and Isaac rolled his eyes.

"Don't worry about it," Isaac said, cuffing Gareth gently across the shoulder. "If Mum can't get it fixed today, I'll-" He cut off, all three of them pausing. There was angry yelling in the distance.

"Oh, Mars, that's my sister," muttered Gareth, peeking around the corner of his house. "Oh, yeah, that was her flower

garden..." The larger boy slapped his forehead with a gloved palm, letting out a soft grunt.

Jenna and Isaac exchanged amused glances, Isaac grabbing Gareth by the shoulder. "Come on, we'll go the long way around, then."

While the trip to Kraden's was fairly uneventful for the most part – aside from Jenna pausing to watch some puppies playing – it did give them time to converse and wonder what all they could learn from Sol Sanctum in Mt. Aleph. After all, none of them had been in there.

It was when they'd gone between the two cliffs that the three of them paused, listening. Two voices were talking around the corner.

"...don't permit anyone to go into Sol Sanctum," a man's voice was saying. Isaac blinked, feeling a prickle of anger that had nothing to do with anything clench his stomach. There was something familiar about that voice that Isaac couldn't place.

"Can we use that old man?" asked a woman's voice, and out of the corner of his eye, Isaac saw Gareth press the heel of his palm into his forehead, wincing.

There was a brief pause, then the man said, "His knowledge is no meager thing... I believe we can."

"He's much more stubborn than we expected," muttered the woman, sounding a bit frustrated. Isaac's frown deepened, and he stopped an angry growl from getting past his lips.

"But he is quite cunning," continued the man's voice.

There was the sound of something heavy hitting the ground. "If he won't go willingly... Well, I could always-" The woman cut off suddenly.

Quick footsteps moved in their direction, and a tall man and woman appeared, both looking quite angry at finding eavesdroppers. "You! What are you doing here?" growled the blue-skinned man, his scarlet eyes narrowed at the three of them. Jenna gripped her staff in her hands, taking a step back.

"What are *we* doing here?" asked Gareth, his brow furrowed as he took a step forward. "*We* should be asking *you* that."

"Were you eavesdropping on our conversation?" demanded the woman, her white hair seeming to billow, even though there wasn't much of a breeze. Both Isaac and Gareth clutched their heads.

Why was this so familiar? "N-no," grunted Isaac.

"Don't lie!" screeched the woman, stepping forward with scythe in hand, but the man stopped her.

"Wait, Menardi," he said, staring at Isaac with a strange look. Was that recognition? "Are you three here to see the old man, then?" asked the blue man, eyes still narrowed as he looked from one teen to the next.

The three teens were still and silent for a few moments, then they nodded. The woman, Menardi, looked confusedly at her companion, whose face was slowly starting to split in a smile, his red eyes glinting. "Saturos?" she asked.

"Let us not keep them from their appointment, my dear sister," crooned the man, stepping back a few paces. "After all, our business with the Alchemist is done." Menardi

blinked, then, slowly, a grin started playing across her own lips as she stepped back as well, giving the three room to pass.

"Go on, then," purred Menardi, shouldering her scythe. Hesitantly, Isaac and his friends walked away, all three of them watching Saturos and Menardi over their shoulders before reaching the stairs that lead to Kraden's home. The two didn't follow, and soon they were out of sight.

"What was that all about?" asked Gareth in an undertone as he, Isaac and Jenna climbed the repaired stairs, looking over his shoulder.

"I don't know," said Isaac softly. He felt slightly out of breath, rubbing his forehead before looking to his friend. "Garet did they-" The teenager cut off, looking forward as he noticed Kraden pacing back and forth in front of his house.

The old man had white hair and a matching beard that he was currently stroking. He was wearing a long, brown cloak and looked like he was deep in thought, which wasn't a surprise, but Kraden seemed quite concerned about something. "They know more about Sol Sanctum than even I know," Kraden was saying in his soft, deep voice. Isaac, Gareth and Jenna paused, listening. "The elements... They plan to set them in motion?" Kraden turned and looked up at the peak of Mt. Aleph like Isaac's mother had earlier. "Alchemy..." His musings fell into quiet muttering, and the three teenagers stepped forward.

"Hey, Kraden," said Isaac, frowning. The old man jumped, looking over and adjusting his spectacles.

"Oh, Isaac," he said distractedly, looking to the other two as well.

"You seem bothered, Kraden," said Jenna, looking a bit concerned herself.

"Do I?" asked Kraden, pulling on his white beard again, trying to look nonchalant. "Ah, well..."

"It was those two," grumbled Gareth, looking over his shoulder in the direction of the man and woman they'd passed on the way there. "Saturos and Menardi..." The large boy rubbed a place in the middle of his forehead with a frown, wincing again.

"Are they still out there?" asked Kraden, and Gareth shook his head.

"No, I can't see them. I think they left." Gareth kept rubbing at his forehead with a grimace.

"They are quite persistent," mused Kraden inwardly, frowning.

"Did they want something, Kraden?" asked Jenna, looking over her shoulder as well and gripping her staff.

"That seems to be the case." Isaac watched as Kraden adjusted his cloak, as if he were shrugging it off.

Gareth and Jenna looked to Kraden, both of them tilting their heads in confusion. Isaac blinked. "'Seems to be'?" all three of them repeated at the same time.

Kraden's frown seemed to deepen as he pursed his lips. "They spoke of Sol Sanctum as if they'd seen it with their own eyes," he mused, curling the end of his beard around a finger.

"That's really strange," muttered Isaac. Kraden, Gareth and Jenna looked at him. "I mean, the elders don't even let *us* in and we *live* here."

"You can't go in without a very good reason, and you have to clear it with the Great Healer," agreed Kraden. "And even *then*, you have to be accompanied by an elder. Unless..." Kraden coughed, and Isaac raised an eyebrow. The old man blushed through his beard.

Jenna wasn't watching Kraden. "Unless they snuck in secretly. Which means..." The boys' eyes widened.

"They might be thieves!" cried Gareth.

"We have to tell the elders," said Isaac, and all three of them turned.

"Wait!" shouted Kraden. They froze, and turned to look at him, confused. Kraden was looking slightly embarrassed, but there was another expression mixed in that Isaac couldn't place. "I still don't know how accurate the things they told me were. And besides, we can't tell anyone unless we confirm what they said."

"You mean..." Isaac blinked at the old man. "We'll have to sneak into Sol Sanctum, too?"

Kraden was silent for a few moments. "Yes."

All three teenagers blanched. "But..." Jenna looked from her friends to Kraden. "Isn't that... You know, impossible?"

"Why would it be?" asked Kraden, and there was a suddenly very mischievous glint in his eye as he regarded Jenna. "Just because it's forbidden without permission?"

"Well..." Gareth stared at Kraden. "...Yeah?" The teenagers exchanged glances again, and Kraden smiled.

"We're just going to see if they've been in the mountain. Surely..." Kraden tapped the side of his nose with a wizened hand. "...that would be acceptable!"

"Well as long as they don't see us..." Jenna gaped at Isaac as the boy rubbed his chin, looking to Gareth. The taller boy smirked.

"If those two can get in, we can," agreed Gareth. The boys and Kraden looked to Jenna, who looked between the three of them with a timid frown.

"Well... We were going anyway, and I suppose... Um... It'd be nice to go without having to be escorted."

Kraden let out a laugh, clapping his hands together. "Then it's decided!" The old man looked to Isaac. "You'll be the leader, then?" he asked. Isaac blinked, feeling his cheeks starting to heat up.

"Uh..." Gareth clapped his friend on the shoulder, smiling widely

"Come on, you'd make a good leader." Jenna nodded.

"Yeah, you're more cautious than Gareth is. He'd probably lead us off the cliff," she said, smirking at the tall boy.

Gareth's smile slid off his face, and he frowned at Jenna. After a moment, he pouted and crossed his arms over his chest sulkily. "You don't have to be so mean about it," he grumbled. Jenna grinned, reaching over to poke Gareth in the arm with her staff.

Isaac was smiling as the two of them bickered behind him. "I'll do it," he said loudly, and Kraden smiled, letting out a soft chuckle.

The wizened man suddenly got a thoughtful look on his face as Jenna and Gareth turned away from each other. "One moment," he said, and turned away, going into his house. The three of them exchanged brief looks before Kraden stepped back out, stuffing something shiny into the inside pocket of his cloak. "This is our best bet," he said, looking expectantly to Isaac with a smile. "Shall we go, then?"

Isaac, Gareth, Jenna and Kraden were halfway across the bridge that lead up to the Healer's Sanctum. Isaac had to pause, alongside Gareth, to look down at the river that lead to the waterfall. Both boys stared at the spot where four men had stood in a line to defend their home from a massive boulder three years ago.

They let out a low sigh, turning to move on, but Jenna held out her arm to stop them. "We have a problem." Jenna pointed out across the bridge, where an elder in his long, blue robes was standing near a tree, right in the middle of a path that lead to Mt. Aleph. Kraden was stroking his beard, a small frown on his face.

"Hm," he murmured, glancing southeast. "Gareth, is that your sister?" Gareth, blinking, looked as well. Sure enough, his sister was visible across the cliffs, still quite livid. "What is she so angry about?"

"Um..." The tall boy blushed, rubbing the back of his head. "I kinda pushed a large rock over her flower garden," he mumbled. Jenna rolled her eyes.

"Do you have a plan, Kraden?" she asked. The old man, twirling the end of his beard around a finger, nodded.

"Perhaps. Wait here." Kraden walked across the bridge, right up to the elder. They couldn't hear what Kraden was saying, but he made some gestures in the direction of Gareth's sister. After a few moments, the elder hurried off, not giving the bridge a glance, toward the angry girl. Kraden motioned to the trio, and they hurried after the old man.

"What did you tell him?" asked Isaac with a wide grin as they walked single-file along the narrow passage that connected Vale to the base of Mt. Aleph.

"Oh, just that Gareth's sister was making a large fuss and kindly asked him if he would play peace-keeper," said Kraden nonchalantly, looking a little bit pleased with himself all the same.

"I could've done that," muttered Gareth once they reached the other side, crossing his arms over his broad chest with a soft grunt.

"I don't know," said Isaac thoughtfully. "That elder might have gotten suspicious if either of us tried. Jenna might have been more successful..."

"I doubt it," said the girl with a sigh. "He'd have probably asked me to come along to help, and if I'd declined, he'd get suspicious anyway." All the while, Kraden's smug grin widened.

"Oh, please, Kraden, don't be so modest," said Isaac, smirking. "At any rate, we're here," he added, looking up at the mountain. It'd always been an utterly massive landmark, but now that they were right at the base, it loomed above them, seeming to cast a shadow so dark, it was almost a blanket. In front of them was a pair of large, heavy-looking white stone doors, like the Healer's Sanctum they'd walked past earlier.

Isaac in front, the group of four stepped up to the entrance to Sol Sanctum, he and Gareth pushing hard on a door each. With a great heave, they shoved the doors open, loud scraping noises filling their ears. Before entering themselves, the boys bowed, extending their arms graciously to allow Kraden and Jenna to walk in. They all got a good laugh out of that, and once everyone was in, Gareth and Isaac pushed the doors almost closed so the elders wouldn't be suspicious, but open enough so that they could open the doors quickly and get out if they needed to.

They all looked around, Kraden especially looking quite awed. "I've never been in here," said Isaac.

"It's an important relic of your past." Kraden walked over to a wall, running a wrinkled hand over the hard stone. "Take a good look, and remember..." The old man looked up, smiling wistfully. Isaac allowed him a few moments, then cleared his throat. Kraden coughed. "Er, right! Isaac, it should be a fairly straight shot, so if you would please..." The Venus Adept let out a soft laugh, and walked ahead, Gareth beside him and Kraden and Jenna bringing up the rear. "Oh, we should be careful, by the way," spoke up Kraden. "There are various monsters here. Luckily, you three are young and strong."

"Right, we're going to do all the work while you get to sit back and watch," grumbled Gareth, but he had a glint in his eye as he fingered the hilt of his sword. "Don't worry, we can take care of it, Kraden."

"Oh?" said the old man, eyeing Gareth and Isaac's swords. "Are you any good with those?"

"I'm alright," said Isaac, shrugging. "These were the only things we could afford. The blacksmiths would never give us discounts, even though we live here. Personally," he added,

looking down at the short blade with a small frown, "I'd have preferred something with more range..."

Garet drew his own sword, weighing it in his hand. "I was fond of that axe that was in there. Did you see that thing?" he asked Isaac, who let out a low whistle.

"I bet you could have chopped that stone you were training on in half."

"I *know*! That thing is so expensive, though..."

"That mace was pretty nice, too."

"Yeah, but it's really personal preference. Do I want to chop something in half, or crush it into oblivion?"

"Well, you could just turn the axe around and use the blunt end," Isaac pointed out, drawing his own sword once they entered another room.

"Yeah," mused Garet, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "But it might bounce off and get me in the shoulder, or worse."

"True, maces are more likely to stick into a target-"

"You're starting to sound like your mothers shopping for clothes," cut in Jenna, reaching up to ruffle the boys' hair. Kraden was looking quite amused. Isaac and Garet blushed deeply, ducking away from Jenna's hands. Once they'd gone ahead a few more paces, they spoke in an undertone.

"Though we *could* use some armor as well... I'm getting tired of bats tearing up my shirt," muttered Isaac. Garet was about to respond when something hot whooshed past their heads, colliding with something in the air. There was a shrill screech before something black and charred landed on the

floor at their feet. The boys turned, looking at Jenna, whose hand was still giving off a red glow.

"Try to pay better attention, won't you?" she asked, blowing away a bit of smoke that rose from her fingers with a smirk. "I have to watch you boys' backs, not your fronts. That's your job." The boys blushed, but suddenly, Isaac blinked at something behind Jenna and Kraden, and he slammed his foot on the ground. There was a rumble under their feet as Jenna and Kraden spun around, a pillar of earth sliding seamlessly back into the floor. Above them, however, was a massive rat, falling back down to the ground with a heavy thud, where it lay unmoving.

Kraden adjusted his glasses bemusedly. "Well," he said, "I think you three are even, now." The teenagers all blushed, and nodded, Isaac and Gareth leading the way further into the Sanctum, Jenna averting her eyes from Kraden as he allowed a smirk to play across his lips. It wasn't too long until the group reached a dead end. It was a fairly large room, with three large statues resting against the far wall. Kraden stepped forward, cleaning his spectacles on his cloak and looking around. "It's strange..."

"Yeah," agreed Gareth, finally sliding his sword back into its scabbard, "all that walking and we end up at a dead end?"

Isaac and Jenna were frowning, staring at Kraden's back as the old man looked around. "While Gareth has a point," said Jenna, walking up beside the wizened man, "I don't think that's what you meant, Kraden."

After a moment, Kraden shook his head. "No... I've been in here before, with an elder as an escort, to study the Sanctum, but..." He turned to Isaac. "This place is called Sol Sanctum, yes?" Isaac nodded, and Kraden smiled. "It's

strange that this is the furthest we can go, and yet there's no picture, or glyph, to indicate it as such." The three teens blinked, exchanging glances with one another.

"Then..." Isaac rubbed his chin, frowning. "You think there's maybe something more to this room?" he asked. Kraden nodded thoughtfully, and walked over to the middle statue. Isaac turned to Jenna and Gareth. "Split up and look around, I suppose."

After a few minutes of looking around in vain, Isaac walked by the statue to the far right, and felt his scarf billow slightly in a soft breeze. "Hey..." He walked over to the large stone knight, crouching. "Hey! I think I found something!" he called, and the other three stepped over. "I can feel a breeze here. Gareth, help me push this." The larger boy stepped forward and pressed his shoulder to the side of the statue, and along with Isaac, they pushed. After a few moments, the statue finally gave way and started sliding to one side, revealing a hole large enough for them to step through.

Kraden's eyes were twinkling, and he looked giddy. "Good job, Isaac!" he exclaimed, running through the tunnel. Gareth and Isaac straightened up, Jenna patting them on the shoulder.

"Hurry up and let's follow after him before-" Suddenly, Kraden ran back the way he came, rushing past the three Adepts. On his heels, a white, floating spirit was zooming after him. It had a pair of red eyes and a gaping mouth, and its arms were detached from its main body. "-something attacks him," finished Jenna, running after Kraden as Gareth stood, blue rings surrounding his body.

Isaac simply ran forward, as he and Jenna were faster than Gareth. Kraden had jumped behind another statue as a

fireball collided with the white creature's back. It didn't burn up or fall, but it did turn nasty, malevolent eyes on Jenna and Isaac. "Be careful!" called Kraden, as if he were reading out of a book. "That's an Amaze. They're described as spirits, and are quite powerful, but they can still be struck by conventional weapons."

"What, chucking fireballs at them isn't conventional?" quipped Isaac as Gareth stepped up, flanking him with Jenna, whose own hands were starting to glow, the Amaze gazing at the three of them in turn.

"You're complaining about being able to hit something?" asked Gareth, and he rushed at the white creature. It dodged his sword swing, countering with a swipe of its claws. It slashed at the taller boy's shirt, but didn't draw blood. Taking the opportunity, Jenna hurled another fireball, which the Amaze was ready for this time, swaying to one side and slamming into Gareth with such force to send him onto his back. The fireball instead collided with the statue Kraden was hiding behind.

"Sorry, Kraden!" she shouted, but Isaac ran straight for the white creature, which had turned its scarlet eyes on him with a loud screech, its arms extended, and what looked like red transparent skulls slammed into his chest, sending him flying back into Jenna. It felt like he'd been punched by a giant.

"Damn!" coughed Isaac, sitting up. "Thanks for the cushioning, Jenna." The girl let out a pained groan.

"No problem..." Gareth had stood up again, going on the offensive against the Amaze, where it dodged every attack the large teen swung its way. It was backing away towards the wall, giving Isaac an idea.

Blue rings started to form around his body and he gave off a yellow aura. "Garet, back off!" he shouted, and Garet paused from his assault to look over his shoulder. The Amaze raised its arms again, but Isaac slammed his foot on the ground and with a rumbling of earth, a pillar of rose again. The Amaze couldn't move back, since it was right against the wall, and forward made it closer to Garet, so the pillar collided and sent it flying upwards at the ceiling. Jenna had gotten to her feet as well and ran forward as the Amaze drifted slowly toward the ground in a daze. She leaped, raising her staff into the air before bringing it down hard onto the Amaze's head.

It flickered, and swayed. Lifting its arm one last time, it didn't get a chance to attack as Garet brought down his sword, chopping the white monster in half. The two halves disappeared, and the three Adepts let out a simultaneous sigh of relief. Kraden, who only had a slight burn on the hem of his cloak, emerged from behind the statue, scribbling onto a small journal. "Amazing. Good teamwork, you three. Are you hurt?" he asked once he put the book and pen away.

"Shirt's ruined, but I'm alright," grunted Garet, rolling his shoulder. "I still say I'd have been better with an axe. I keep overswinging with this tiny thing."

"I'm fine, Kraden," said Jenna, brushing dirt off of her sleeves from when Isaac had been thrown into her.

Speaking of Isaac, he had his eyes closed, pressing a glowing hand to his chest where the Amaze's attack had hit him. "Probably got some nasty bruises. Nothing a little healing won't take care of..." Kraden smiled at Isaac.

"Having Cure Psynergy must be nice," grumbled Garet, looking at his torn shirt. "Look at this. My mother's gonna kill

me."

"Feel lucky you hadn't been gored," snapped Jenna.

"It doesn't matter," said Isaac, and turned toward the tunnel. "We'd better get moving before something else attacks us."

The two paused from their bickering, and Kraden nodded. "He's right. Please, lead the way, Isaac." Through the tunnel, they emerged into a large, square room. It seemed to give off a warm, pleasant glow. In the middle was a picture of the sun. "This is it!" cried Kraden, running into the middle of the room and crouching down to run a wizened hand over the yellow stone. "This is the true heart of Sol Sanctum..."

The other three, meanwhile, were gazing at the four statues that surrounded the sun. They were goddesses, holding crystal urns in their white hands. "What's this all about?" asked Gareth, reaching out to poke the urn gingerly.

"This is what those two described to me," Kraden was saying, pulling out his journal again and a pen.

"Wait, so if they knew about that secret passage," Jenna mused, looking at one of the goddess statues herself, "that means..."

"That means that those two *were* thieves!" growled Isaac.

Gareth's face darkened in a frown. "We have to go to the elders!"

Before any of them moved, however, Kraden spoke softly, making them freeze. "We're so close..."

The three young Adepts froze, and stared at Kraden as he climbed back to his feet, twirling his beard around his finger

again. "Close to what, exactly?" asked Isaac.

Kraden didn't answer. Instead, he walked toward the other hallway, where a soft blue light contrasted with the current room. After a moment's pause and exchanged looks, the three of them followed Kraden into the neighboring room. It was almost an exact mirror image of the previous room, aside from the floor holding a picture of the moon, rather than the sun. "Luna," muttered Kraden, crouching down again. "There's something about this room." The old man stood up, walking to each of the goddess statues in turn, scribbling frantically on his journal.

"Kraden?" asked Isaac hesitantly. The old man jumped, blinking at Isaac as if he'd only just realized he was there.

"Oh! Isaac, I was only thinking... It wouldn't do to leave this place now." Kraden snapped the book shut, letting out a soft cough. "You never know, there might be something more here..." The old man placed a wrinkled hand upon the arm of one of the goddess statues. "Luna and Sol... These two rooms are connected, don't you think?" Isaac and the other two didn't answer. It seemed Kraden was asking the goddess herself rather than the three of them, anyway. "Isaac!" Kraden said suddenly, making them jump. "We must traverse a little further. Please?" he added, even bringing the wizened hands together as he regarded Isaac.

Jenna and Garet looked to their friend as he pressed a palm to his forehead. "Ugh, Venus help me." Letting out a deep sigh, he looked to Kraden and nodded. "Fine. Come on." He walked off to the side, toward the entrance to a hallway they hadn't gone down yet.

"Excellent! I'll stay here and study this room," called Kraden, and Isaac lifted a hand to show he heard him.

As the three teenagers walked, Isaac couldn't help but let out a groan. "I feel like Kraden just wants to be left alone so he can study the moon."

"If he wanted to do that, wouldn't he have just waited until midnight? That's what he usually did when he showed us the planets." Gareth drew his sword and looked at it. It was already nicked in some places, and he frowned at it. "Cheap bit of metal," he grumbled as they walked up a flight of spiral stairs and followed the hallway

Jenna was watching Isaac, though as they emerged into a massive room, her brown eyes beheld a familiar sight. In the middle was a square platform with a picture of Luna like the one downstairs, except without the blue glow and surrounded by water with four goddess statues standing around it. However, there were dark, empty squares on the corners from the platform.

"Well, this is simple," said Gareth gruffly, and he stepped forward, getting to the side of the goddess statue and pressing his shoulder to it.

"Wait!" yelled Isaac suddenly, reaching up to clutch his head. This time, Gareth froze.

"Was that switch the trap?"

Isaac's heart started beating against his chest as he looked at the darkened tile the goddess statue was standing next to. "Don't push that statue," he said, rather hoarsely as Jenna and Gareth stared at him.

"Why?" asked Jenna, but Isaac shook his head.

"Just... Don't. Not yet." Isaac walked toward the opposite hallway entrance, emerging into a neighboring room almost

identical to the one with the picture of Luna, but again like the room directly below it, this one had Sol again.

The main difference was a fifth goddess statue towering above the other four. She held a large bowl on her head, balancing it with her hands. Isaac saw that there were two dark tiles like the ones in the previous room next to the large statue. "Isaac?" asked Gareth tentatively.

"Gareth, push that statue onto the tile," said Isaac, pointing to the far corner of the room while he moved around to the closer one.

"Are you sure this time?" asked Jenna, jumping onto the middle platform with Sol and looking up at the face of the goddess.

"Yeah," said Isaac, and he meant it. He didn't know what exactly had made him stop Gareth in the other room, but something in his gut made him think that something horrible might happen if he hadn't.

The two boys pushed hard on the statues, and they slid onto the brown tiles. Beams of light issued from the crystal urns in their hands onto the ground at the fifth goddess' feet. After a moment, a hole, wide enough to engulf the goddess statue, appeared where the beams of light met. The boys jumped onto the middle platform with Jenna, glancing into the hole, then up at the goddess, and finally at each other.

Nodding, they lifted their hands, pointing their palms at the fifth statue as blue rings surrounded their bodies. After a moment, their hands glowed, and another pair of massive, ghostly white hands appeared, grabbing the statue before them. With heaves of effort, they pulled, and the statue slide forward into the hole with a loud, resounding crash.

Click.

The three of them looked at each other. "I think..." Isaac glanced toward the neighboring room, lowering his hand.

"I get you," said Gareth, and the trio hurried into the next room. It was unchanged, but the horrible feelings that had twisted Isaac's stomach were gone, and he stepped up to the nearest statue. With a heave, the carved stone deity was pushed onto the tile. Immediately, another beam of light shone onto one corner of the platform, where the section the light hit began to change. That one section now resembled the picture of Sol.

"Do you think something happened downstairs, too?" asked Jenna, and sure enough, a moment later Kraden burst into the room, looking both excited and shocked.

"What happened?" he demanded, looking at the three in turn.

They explained, briefly, what they'd done, Kraden examining the room that now had a twelve foot goddess statue in a hole. "Amazing. I was wondering what that loud noise was," murmured the old man, and he looked fit to burst with excitement again. "Isaac, the picture of Luna downstairs changed as well. Who knows what will happen if all four statues are on the tiles?" The teens glanced at each other again, even though they were all as curious as Kraden, who turned away, scribbling madly in his journal. "I'll be downstairs where it's safe. Come back down when you have all of them in place!"

Once Kraden was gone, Jenna, Isaac and Gareth blinked. "'Where it's safe?'" repeated Gareth, frowning at the empty hallway, then shook his head. It seemed he couldn't be

upset by that long, for he walked over to an unmoved statue, looking expectantly to the other two.

Isaac glanced to Jenna as well. "Think you can move one?" he asked.

"They don't seem too heavy," she said, shrugging and shouldering her staff, hopping over to the other side of the room and regarding the statue with a small incline of the head.

Sure enough, Isaac was able to push the last statue with relative ease, and once all statues were on the tiles, there was a great rumbling from all around them, and the middle platform had turned fully from Luna to Sol.

Feeling quite excited himself, Isaac ran down the hall and downstairs, Jenna and Gareth on his heels. Once they reached the Luna room, they saw Kraden standing in the middle of Sol, the warm glow turning his hair and beard almost as bright red as Gareth's hair.

"Incredible!" he exclaimed, stuffing his journal into his cloak. "Come on, you three. If my suspicions are correct..." Kraden ran to the neighboring room, the three teenagers following. Sure enough, the room was now a cool blue, juxtaposed from the yellow behind them. The major change now, however, was a beam of light casting from the middle of Luna to the far wall. Kraden stepped up to the wall and pressed a shaking, wrinkled hand against it. After a moment, a wide oval of light expanded from the point where the beam of light landed, glowing even brighter than Sol. Kraden was breathing heavily, his beard bristling.

The three teenagers walked forward, staring in awe at the oval of light. "Kraden... What is this?" asked Isaac breathlessly.

"This, Isaac," replied Kraden, extending his hand toward it, "is a gateway." Isaac, after a moment's pause, stepped toward the gateway, glancing imploringly to Kraden, who bowed his head slightly. The blonde-haired teen pressed his palm into the white oval, and felt himself get pitched forward into it.

For a while, all he could see was white.

Isaac felt his feet land on something hard and solid, and he stumbled clumsily for a moment before straightening up. His blue eyes widened as he looked out at the expanse of black all around him. There were stone pillars and platforms all around him, including the one he'd just dropped down on, and they were all an eerie blue color that gave off a gentle, cool glow, like the Luna room he just left.

"Where are we?" asked Garet as he landed soon after Isaac. "Are we still in the Sanctum?"

"I don't know," replied Isaac, stepped over to the edge of the large platform he stood on and looked down. What looked like water rested smooth and black, like sheets of glass, below.

"Mars," gasped Jenna, her brown eyes glittering as she looked around. She'd landed a fair bit more gracefully than the boys. "Isaac, this place... Do you...?" Isaac shook his head and they all turned to the gateway as something dark formed in the middle, at first very oblong before becoming the shape of Kraden, who dropped to the ground in a slight crouch. Once he'd straightened up, he blinked.

"Amazing!" he exclaimed, taking off his spectacles and wiping them with shaking hands as he ran to the edge of the platform as Isaac had done. "...The ocean?" he muttered. The three teenagers blinked confusedly. After a moment,

Kraden frowned, placing his spectacles back onto his nose. "No, the ocean has waves. We must still be deep under Mt. Aleph..."

"Uh, Kraden," said Gareth, interrupting the wizened man's musings, "what's that?" Kraden blinked and looked at Gareth, confused. "The... 'Ocean'. What does that mean?"

"Oh," murmured Kraden. "Of course, you've never seen it. I won't be able to explain it properly... I'd have to show you. Just imagine... A pond, but stretching out for hundreds of miles." The teens looked confused and Gareth especially disbelieving.

"Could that much water really exist somewhere?" he asked, a smile starting to form. "I don't think I could imagine that." Gareth let out a soft scoff, shaking his head. "The ocean..."

"Really, what *is* real in the world these days," muttered Kraden, turning his back on the three and looking out into the darkness. "Maybe someday I'll show it to you three myself... Wait, what's this?" Isaac and the others followed as Kraden stepped over to one corner. It seemed that the darkness all around them was starting to dissipate, revealing more about the massive chamber the more they looked. In the distance, on another large platform like the one they were standing on was a statue of a goddess, this one giving off a warm yellow glow.

As he and the others looked around, more glowing statues appeared through the darkness, all of different colors; Purple, blue, and red. "The Elemental Stars," breathed Kraden, now breathing hard and fast. "They exist!" Kraden's wrinkled hands shaking, he ran from one corner of the platform to the other, looking out at each statue in turn.

"Didn't you teach us about those?" asked Jenna, and Gareth had a uncharacteristically thoughtful look on his face as he rubbed his chin.

"Earth, Fire, Water, Air... Everything in the world is made up of those elements, even us." He looked to Isaac. "...Right?" he asked in an undertone. Isaac nodded, smiling to his friend, who grinned. Kraden, meanwhile, turned to them, his eyes glinting manically.

"Exactly! Legends have stated that the Elemental stars contained the pure essence of each element it represents." Kraden swept over point at the yellow glowing statue. "Venus Star, the element of Earth!" He waved his hand in the direction of the stone glowing a deep, hot red. "Mars Star... Glowing red with the power of Fire!" Kraden very nearly skipped as he ran to another corner, pointing to the statue with the blue glow. "Mercury, blue with Water and Ice!" The wizened man almost ran off the edge of the platform, groping longingly at the final, purple glow. "Jupiter, representing Wind's fury!"

The teenagers exchanged worried glances with each other, blinking at Kraden. "Kraden," said Jenna softly, "why are you getting so excited?"

Kraden turned, suddenly looking stern and frowning deeply at them. "How can you stand there so calmly? You're in the presence of physical legends! The very source of all Alchemy!" Kraden extended his arms wide, taking in all the various colors making his body almost glow all its own. "I'm sure I've told you about it," he said softly, looking to the three of them again. Isaac racked his brains, and the other two seemed to be thinking hard themselves.

"I think so," murmured Isaac, a bell starting to ring. Gareth sighed, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Must've fallen asleep during that lesson, then..." Jenna frowned at the taller boy.

"It started with the search for the Wisdom Stone," said Kraden patiently, pacing slowly back and forth from one corner of the platform to the other.

"Right," said Isaac, his memory coming back. "It can turn matter into gold, right?" Gareth suddenly became much more interested, leaning eagerly at Kraden as the old man nodded.

"Yes. It can even thwart death," he said softly, twirling his beard around a finger.

Jenna's eyes were locked onto the red glow of Mars. "I don't get how they work," she said, "but they're supposed to hold enormous power, aren't they? The Wisdom Stones, I mean."

"Beyond enormous," replied Kraden, walking up to a single tower that was level with the one they were all standing on. "Why, with a single Stone, one could rule the world!" All three of them blanched, looking aghast.

After a moment's silence, Gareth let out an unconvinced scoff, though he still looked worried. "Don't scare us like that! Like... Like someone could take over the world..." He looked to Isaac, but Isaac's eyes were on Kraden, his brow furrowed.

"Who can say what the truth is these days," he said again, walking to the very edge of the platform and leaning slightly toward the flat tower before him. It looked as if the platforms were stone bridges at one point, but had eroded greatly over time. "That's why I've been searching all these years for the

Elemental Stars, to find the truth." Kraden suddenly leaped over to the platform, his feet slipping slightly. Isaac, Gareth, and Jenna ran forward, but he was already walking. "And now here they are... Ahh!" His foot slipped off the edge, but luckily, he caught himself.

"Kraden, get back here!" Jenna cried sternly, reaching out with her staff to hook it onto his cloak.

"But..." Kraden turned, looking at her with an almost pleading look. "I must study the Stars." With a little more coaxing, he jumped back over to the main platform and almost seemed to whine. "They're so close..."

Jenna let out a frustrated sigh, glancing at Isaac and Gareth before blinking up at them, smiling. "Make the boys get them," she suggested.

The result was immediate. Kraden spun around, a smiled stretching his features. "I-I couldn't ask..." His spine bent slightly in a small bow, looking up at the boys. "Would you?" Gareth and Isaac exchanged glances, then let out simultaneous, deep sighs, and nodded. Kraden actually bounced up and down on his feet, clapping his wizened hands together. "Here," he said, reaching into his cloak and pulling out four small, metallically shimmering bags with lengths of leather twine to tie them closed. Isaac accepted them, holding them up to examine them more closely.

"What are they?" asked Gareth, voicing Isaac's question exactly.

"Didn't you bring those from your cottage, Kraden?" asked Jenna furrowing her brow at them. Isaac wondered if she was thinking the same thing he was.

"They're bags woven from Mythril. I had them prepared for just such an occasion," he said, still bouncing slightly on his feet.

"'Prepared'?" repeated Isaac and Jenna, but Gareth shrugged his larger shoulders.

"Come on, Isaac, let's go grab these things already." After an exchanged glance with Jenna, Isaac followed his friend to the edge of the platform, and together they jumped across the broken paths to the first Star, the one that glowed a bright, warm yellow. Looking a bit sheepishly at the goddess, he turned one of the bags inside-out, reached in with a hand, and reached up to grab the Star. It was a yellow orb that was fairly normal-looking, aside from the glowing, but gave off an underlying power that Isaac could feel travel down his arm, even through the Mythril. Pulling the bag normally again and tying it off, the yellow light disappeared.

"Good!" yelled Kraden, waving to them. "Get the others!" Isaac and Gareth rolled their eyes as they hopped across small platforms to the next statue, which held the purple Jupiter Star in her hand. Once it was safely in the bag, Kraden shouted again. "One two left, boys!"

"You'd think we didn't know how to count," grumbled Gareth as they jumped toward the blue Mercury statue.

"I dunno, you couldn't count past twenty until you were twelve, Gareth," teased Isaac, earning him a cuff across the back of his head once they reached the statue. "You want to grab this one?"

Gareth nodded and took the bag, still grumbling to himself and dropping the purple orb into it with a sigh. It took them a few moments to realize that Kraden had gone completely

silent, the boys blinking and looking toward the central platform. Isaac took in a sharp gasp.

Saturos and Menardi stood on the platform with Jenna and Kraden. The blue-haired man smirked at Gareth and Isaac while Mendardi scowled, her hand clamped over Jenna's mouth as she struggled against her. "Looks like we've been found out," said Saturos, his calm voice carrying to the boys near the statue.

"It's a shame," grumbled Menardi, letting Jenna go, since there was no point in keeping her silent any longer. "I was hoping they'd have all the Stars before they realized we were here..."

"No matter," said Saturos, walking toward the edge of the platform, but Kraden suddenly spoke up.

"You mean to steal the Stars!" Saturos paused, looking at Kraden.

"I'm sorry," said Menardi sweet as venom, her hand gripping her scythe threateningly, "but wasn't it *you* who stole *our* information to get here?"

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Jenna, moving in between Saturos and Kraden, her hand spread. Isaac only just noticed that her staff lay a few yards away, broken in two.

"Nothing, if we're given the Elemental Stars," said Saturos, his red eyes flashing in Isaac's direction.

Isaac, feeling anger twist his insides again, shouted, "Are we supposed to believe that?"

"I'm sure they'll do us in once they no longer need us," sneered Kraden over Jenna's shoulder.

"Relax," said a new, deeper voice as someone dropped from the white gateway. He had a long cape hanging down one shoulder, and long, brown hair that hung down on either side of his face in curtains and down his back in a long ponytail. On his face was a brown and green mask. "You will not be harmed, as long as you cooperate."

Jenna backed away from the masked man, still holding her arms out to protect Kraden. Menardi, meanwhile, turned to Isaac, calling to him. As she spoke, Gareth rubbed at the middle of his forehead with a wince. "You hear that? If you give us the Elemental stars, your friends will not be harmed."

"What guarantee do we have that you'll let us go?" asked Isaac, his hand gripping the hilt of his sword.

"Guarantee..." Menardi bit onto the end of a long, sharp nail, then smirked. "I have one." She turned slowly to the masked man. "You will have to take off your mask." The man blanched, his head turned in Jenna's direction.

"But..." For the first time, the man was fidgeting, tugging at the gloves on his hands, his head now turning in Isaac's direction.

"What kind of guarantee is that?" demanded Jenna.

"Under the circumstances, we have little choice." Saturos turned from Isaac and Gareth, looking at the man. "Felix, remove your mask."

"Felix?" repeated Jenna, now staring at the masked man. "That... No... *Felix?*"

The masked man stood as still as the statue Gareth and Isaac stood next to. Gareth was staring at the masked man with his mouth agape. "Wait, did I hear that right? Felix... Wasn't that Jenna's brother?" He looked to Isaac, who nodded, looking from Jenna, to the masked man, to Saturos and Menardi in turn.

"Yeah, but he died when the Boulder..." Isaac's breathing had quickened his heart pounding against his ribcage.

"But..." Jenna's eyes were starting to well up in tears. "Felix... He died! He was washed downstream with my parent's and Isaac's..."

"I'll do it," said the masked man, and he turned his back on them. He reached up, and gripped the chin of the mask with his thumb, pulling it from his face. The brown and green mask was thrown to the side, where it shattered on the hard stone. Slowly, almost hesitantly, the man turned around, and faced his sister. She gasped, clapping both hands over her mouth.

His brown hair was longer, and his face wasn't as round as it was three years ago, those eyes were unmistakable. Jenna's brother Felix stood before them, staring blankly at Jenna. "But... You can't... You're alive?" she whispered, though Isaac could hear her. Felix dipped his head once in a nod. "But... Our parents? Isaac's dad?"

Felix's eyes closed, and he turned away. A lead weight dropped into Isaac's stomach. Tears were streaming down Jenna's face now. "I was lucky to survive," he said, now looking at Saturos and Menardi. "These two found me, and took care of me for three years." His voice was soft, almost deadpan.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she screamed at him, Menardi walking over to grab her by the arm before she could run at Felix. "Why did you leave me? I was alone! For three years, you were *gone!*" Jenna's voice seemed to echo deafeningly around the room, ringing Isaac's ears.

Felix's own eyes began to tear up as he turned to his younger sister, reaching out. "Jenna..." Saturos grabbed Felix by the wrist.

"We must save this teary reunion for later," said the blue-haired man, and Felix pulled away, still watching Jenna. The girl had fallen to her knees, her face in her hands as she sobbed. Saturos turned toward Isaac and Gareth, smiling nastily. "Is that good enough, then?" he called to the boys. "Felix will not allow us to harm you or his sister. That is our guarantee, now hand us the Elemental stars!"

Isaac and Gareth stared daggers at Saturos for a few moments, then turned away. "It doesn't look like we have much choice, buddy," whispered Gareth.

"No, it doesn't," murmured Isaac, running his fingers through his hair. "Alright, give me the Star and I'll..."

"No, I'll do it," interrupted Gareth, holding out a hand. Isaac opened his mouth to argue, but there was a fire in the larger boy's eyes that Isaac had rarely ever seen. He nodded, dropping the two bags into Gareth's hands and the larger boy turned, jumping over along the broken trail towards the large group on the platform. Once he was halfway there, there was a flash of light, and other tall, blue-haired man appeared, standing before Gareth.

"I'll take those off your hands, shall I?" he asked in a calm voice and a small smile. While his hair was blue like

Saturos', it was much paler, resembling a waterfall during the spring.

"Oh, Alex!" called Menardi. "You're late!"

"Alex is with us," said Saturos. "Give the Stars to him."

Garet hesitated a moment, then sighed, holding out the Mythril bags. "After all the work we went through," he grumbled softly.

"I'm afraid I must apologize in advance," said Alex as he accepted the bags, looking genuinely apologetic. "We require the fourth Star as well." The man nodded to Garet, and his body began to shimmer. After a few moments, he rose, unsupported, from the platform, floating silently towards his comrades.

"Wait!" called Garet, and Alex paused, turning back to him. "We have to get the last one, too? They said they'd let Jenna and Kraden go once we gave them the Stars!" The large boy pointed in Saturos and Menardi's direction, Alex looking over with an eyebrow quirked slightly.

"No, you silly boy," said Menardi, speaking slowly and clearly. "We want you to bring us *a//* the Stars." Garet's hand had come up to rub at the middle of his forehead again, grimacing. "Stop grumbling and get moving!"

After a moment, Garet turned away, jumping back toward Isaac. "Fine."

Alex bowed at Garet's retreating back. "Thank you for your cooperation," he said politely, and floated down to the platform to join his comrades.

Garet, his hands on his hips, let out a soft sigh once he reached Isaac, who was frowning in the direction of Saturos and Menardi. "Venus help me, I'm gonna throw him into a deep pit," he growled, reaching up to rub the back of his head, where a dull ache was starting to throb.

"Make that double for Menardi," whispered Garet, rubbing his forehead before following Isaac as they jumped over toward the final statue, which was glowing a bright red. "Let me grab this one." Garet took the final Mythril bag, and reached up to grab the red orb with it. Once the red glow disappeared, there was a moment's pause before the ground began to shake.

"What?" shouted Menardi in surprise.

"No!" yelled Saturos. "Not again!" Isaac and Garet turned, falling onto their knees as they looked over to the others. Kraden was holding Jenna, who had stumbled to the edge of the platform away from the others and looked down.

"The water's gone!" she shouted. Sure enough, when Isaac looked, only glowing red fissures were visible now, and it appeared that the black water had drained away.

"Without the power of the Elemental Stars," cried Alex, looking worried for the first time, "the chamber is collapsing!"

A sharp stalactite fell, clipping the edge of the platform and crumbling as it fell to the ground below. "Is this..." Kraden was looking shocked, holding Jenna protectively. "...'Terrible retribution'? Or... More of Alchemy's power?"

Slowly, the rumbling came to a stop, and everyone let out a sigh of relief, Menardi brushing her long hair over her shoulder. "Finally, it's over."

Jenna scrambled away from the edge again, and pointed. "What is that?" she demanded. Isaac and Gareth looked up. A massive round stone floated before them. It was white and seemed to shine.

Everyone across the gap was staring at it with mouths agape in a mixture of amazement and fear. "What is that?" asked Gareth.

"It looks like a giant floating rock," said Isaac.

"I know that!" snapped the larger boy. "It looks like someone's using Psynergy to lift it." Suddenly, the rock turned, and Isaac's breath caught in his throat. A large eye was fitted in the middle of the rock, and it blinked a stone lid at them. They blanched away from it, scrambling backwards towards the Mars statue.

The rumbling began anew, this time shaking the entire chamber with much more ferocity. The stone with the eye floated upwards toward the ceiling and disappeared. "Such power!" exclaimed Menardi, clutching her scythe.

"We have to get out of here!" shouted Felix, but as the rumbling grew louder and louder, Isaac could barely hear what the group was saying.

He saw Saturos and Menardi arguing with Felix, and Alex speaking as well. Kraden shouted something, perhaps in defense of Jenna, but Saturos talked him down. Finally, it seemed that everyone relented, Menardi picking up Jenna and shoving her at Felix, who yelled at the woman as he caught her. Jenna, however, pushed away, yelling at him.

Another stalactite fell feet from him and he didn't see any more, scrambling over to the goddess statue and crouching under her hands with Gareth. It wasn't a whole lot of

protection, but it was better than nothing. A few seconds later, Isaac thought he could hear Jenna's voice. "Isaac, Gareth!" He looked up, and saw her cupping her hands around her mouth. "Don't die!" She waked to the white gateway, and disappeared into it. One by one, the others left, leaving only Alex to stare at Isaac with those cold blue eyes.

He stared right back, and after a few moments, Alex broke the eye contact, disappearing into the gateway himself.

It took several minutes, but slowly the rumbling died down again, until it was a small tremor. Isaac and Gareth stood up, the larger boy frowning at the central platform. "Well, we're in a tough spot here..."

"Yeah," agreed Isaac, running his fingers through his hair again. "Jenna and Kraden..."

"You don't think they'll hurt them, do you?" asked Gareth, turning back to his friend.

After a few minutes, Isaac shook his head. "No. Felix wouldn't let them."

There was a spike of violent tremors, and the pair of them stumbled, Gareth even falling onto his rear. "Right... We have to get out of here..." As Isaac helped his friend up, they looked around. The platforms they'd used to get to where they were had started to crumble away. "Damn..." Gareth walked toward the edge, looking across the gap. "You think you could use your Psynergy to make a pillar long enough to send us over?" asked Gareth. Isaac didn't answer. After a second, Gareth looked over to the blond teen. "Isaac?"

Isaac was staring at the floating white stone. It had come back down from wherever it had gone, staring at Isaac with

its single eye. Gareth followed Isaac's gaze, and blanched, nearly falling off the edge. *"Why are you two standing around?"* asked a deep, rumbling voice. It echoed in Isaac's mind, but he was sure it was coming from the stone *"This place has become dangerous."*

There was another spike of rumbling, and Gareth found his voice. "Y-you're the dangerous one here!" he shouted at the stone.

It fixed Gareth with its one, blank eye. Isaac wasn't sure, but he could almost read confusion from that look. Below, a fissure began to give off a brighter glow, hot magma seeping out of the hole. Isaac and Gareth ran over, watching as the giant stone hovered over the fissure. After a moment, blue rings began surrounding the stone, and a wave of energy washed over them. The fissure closed, and the rings disappeared. The stone looked at them again. *"The volcano will erupt soon. I cannot hold it long."* It floated back towards them, looking down at the boys. *"You must leave this place."*

Suddenly, several lights popped up around the Mars statue. The stone's one eye widened as the lights disappeared again, flashing upwards toward the ceiling. *"The elemental Djinn... They have returned."* Gareth and Isaac exchanged confused looks, both of them thinking the same thing. Djinn? *"Take out the elemental star,"* said the stone suddenly to Isaac. The teenager hesitated a moment, then took the bag from Gareth, gripping the stone from the outside and letting the bag fall open once he loosened the tie on it. Briefly, the stone made blue rings surround itself and did... Something, to the stone. *"Return it to its bag,"* instructed the stone. Once Isaac did so, the stone rotated slightly, its eye looking up at the ceiling. *"The Elemental Stars are... Moving away from here. Without the Stars to contain it, the*

magma flows freely once again, and this chamber is collapsing."

As the stone spoke, more lights appeared on each of the other statues in turn, seeming to be escaping from their captivity within the chamber. *"With no chamber for the Stars to return to, the world will be exposed to the threat of Alchemy."*

"Alchemy..." Gareth stared blankly at the large stone.

"A threat?" asked Isaac, and the stone, which had been watching the lights disappear, seemed to nod.

"It can be a dangerous power if it is misused," the stone explained. *"If the Elemental Stars ignite the four lighthouses, the power will be released."* Isaac shuddered, trying not to imagine what someone like Saturos might do with such power. *"As long as the lighthouses remain unlit-"* It cut off as the chamber began rumbling anew, and some magma began to seep out of another fissure. As the stone began to close the fissure up, a third one opened. *"It's erupting. You must flee! Now!"*

Isaac and Gareth turned to the central platform, which was too far away for them to jump. "How?" asked Gareth.

The stone looked as well, blinking its single eye. *"Ah, I see... I will assist you."* Once again, blue rings surrounded the stone, and it began to glow a bright white. Isaac looked down at himself as he and Gareth began to do the same. For a split second, there was nothing but silence and white, before the boys fell with a thud in the Luna room.

The place was trembling violently. One of the statues had already fallen over, the crystal urn shattered on the floor.

"Did that thing just save us?" asked Gareth as he stood, helping up his friend.

"I... Think so," muttered Isaac, turning to look at the wall. The white oval of light had disappeared. There was a sudden heave, the ground beneath their feet pitching them forward.

"Yeah, right..." Gareth and Isaac ran. "Let's not let its efforts be in vain, shall we?"

"Our mums are gonna kill us!" shouted Isaac as rats and bats scurried away from them.

Gareth didn't answer. They simply ran. Out of the secret passage, through the hallway, past various creatures and monsters that simply ignored the two boys rushing past. The white stone doors were opened and they emerged in the bright sunshine, pulling their arms up to block it from blinding them.

"How long were we in there?" asked Gareth, staring at the narrow path that lead back to Vale.

"Who knows," muttered Isaac, and the boys walked forward, across the natural bridge. The sky turned a dark, hellish red a few times for a few seconds, and they looked over their shoulders at the peak of Mt. Aleph. It had split in two, and there was a red glow emanating from it. "What have we got ourselves into?" asked Isaac softly, tearing his eyes away from the mountain peak, and walked south, Gareth on his heels.

Emerging near the rear of the Healer's Sanctum, the boys spotted what appeared to be most of the population standing on the stairs. The Great Healer, a man as old as Kraden but with blue silk robes and a tall hat, was watching

the peak of the mountain through his large eyebrows. He stroked his long, white beard.

Isaac's mother wrung her hands worriedly, speaking to one of the elders. "Isaac said that he and his friends were going to the mountain with Kraden. I thought they'd have an elder to escort them," Isaac heard her say. The elder Kraden had distractedly shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

"Weren't they studying Alchemy?" asked the Great Healer, turning to Dora.

"Well, yes," she said, looking confused. "But what does-"

"Hey, there they are!" shouted Gareth's sister, pointing. The mayor turned stern, brown eyes on the two boys, and they walked slowly forward, looking downcast.

"There you are!" said the mayor, looking over their heads. "Where are Jenna and Kraden?" Isaac and Gareth exchanged looks, then turned away.

"It's complicated," said Isaac, glancing to the crowd. The mayor leaned forward, and Isaac whispered to him.

"They've been kidnapped?" he demanded loudly, and a ripple of muttering cut through the crowd behind him. Isaac winced, looking to the old man in blue robes, who was slowly and calmly stroking his beard.

"I think," said the Great Healer, "that you two will have to explain to us exactly what happened. Into the Sanctum, please." As the Great Healer walked past, he turned to Dora. "You too, I imagine you want to hear this."

One by one, Isaac, Gareth, Gareth's grandfather, the Great Healer, the two elders and Dora stepped into the sanctum,

the stone door closing with a heavy thud.

Isaac didn't know how long he and Gareth told the story to the rather large crowd in the sanctum, but they told it to the best of their ability. They tried not to leave out any details that were probably important, and Dora was especially shocked at the news that Felix was still alive.

Once they'd finished, the room was silent for the longest few moments Isaac had ever say through. Dora stared at Isaac, as if burning to ask a question that he felt he knew was coming eventually. Gareth's grandfather was pacing slowly back and forth, his cane thumping on the stone floor. The two elders stood still and silent, staring up at the ceiling. Finally, the Great Healer himself stood facing the wall, his head bowed and his eyes closed.

"Isaac," said Dora softly, and he looked at her. His mother was quiet for a few moments. "They won't... They won't hurt Jenna and Kraden, will they?" Isaac blinked, surprised, but not complaining. Still, this only meant it was delaying the inevitable.

"I don't think so," he said. "Felix is there, so..." The mayor stopped his pacing, clutching his cane.

"I had no idea. None of us... The true Sanctum... Below us all this time..." Gareth's grandfather ran a wrinkled hand through silver hair. He glanced around at each of them in turn, though when his eyes fell on the blue robes of the Great Healer, he blinked. "Are you alright, Great Healer?" he asked. "You've been so quiet this whole time."

All eyes fell on the old man's back as he looked up at the shrine on the far wall. "That hovering stone... The one you and Gareth described," he said softly, turning to Isaac. "I have

seen it before, in my dreams." Everyone stared, silent and listening. "It appeared to me again, just now..."

"Just now?" asked Garet, stepping forward.

"It must be the Wise One, the guardian of the Elemental Stars..." The Great Healer paced slowly up to the shrine, looking up at the small statue it held.

"Did it say anything to you?" asked the mayor. "About the eruption?"

"Is Vale going to-" Dora didn't finish, wringing her hands together.

The Great Healer was silent for a few moments, almost seeming to shimmer in the light from the candles. It almost looked like he was giving off his own light. "It's impossible to stop the eruption now," he said finally, and everyone in the room let out a soft moan of dread. "But, Vale will be safe. The Wise One has promised to redirect the lava and keep it from reaching us." He went silent again as everyone let out a soft sigh of relief, his head bowed at the shrine. This time, Isaac definitely saw a distinct shimmer, as if something was casting a pale light upon the old man.

"What is it?" asked the mayor, stepping toward the Great Healer.

"Vale is going to be destroyed... Isn't it?" asked Dora, letting out a small whimper.

The Great Healer shook his head. "Something much worse than the destruction of Vale looms ahead," he said softly, turning to the room at large now.

"What could be worse...?" Gareth ran his fingers through his massively spiked hair, his brows pressed together in a long line.

"The Elemental Stars house an incredible and terrible power. This village has been guarding these gems." The Great Healer stroked his beard as he spoke, his own impressively massive white eyebrows pushed together as well and obscuring his eyes. "The elemental lighthouses will lose that power upon the world. Once that power has been released the world..." The old man actually shuddered, clutching at his chest with a soft sigh. The mayor stepped over to pat the Great Healer gently on the back.

"The Wise One," said Dora. "...Does it want us to get the gems back?"

"The world is ours," replied the Great Healer, standing a bit straighter, "to save or destroy. Our inaction may bring about its destruction."

"Then what can we do?" asked Isaac's mother, who looked like she was about to start crying.

"Acquiring the Elemental Stars," continued the Great Healer, his head turned directly to Isaac and Gareth, "is their fate alone."

The boys froze, staring blankly at the Great Healer, while everyone else's eyes fell on them. "Are you suggesting," began Dora, her voice now a whisper, "that we set the fate of the world... On the shoulders of Isaac and Gareth?"

The mayor looked stern, his eyes glancing from the Great Healer, to the boys, then back again. "Gareth is only a child! You can't expect him to..."

"The Wise One has spoken," said the Great Healer, turning his back on everyone and bowing his head again. The mayor's voice faded, and dropped, while Dora was staring at her son and Gareth with teary eyes. "Each of you shares responsibility for this," he continued. "Now, each of you must make your decision." The old man straightened up. "Isaac. Gareth." He didn't turn around to face the boys. "Will you accept responsibility for the fate of the world?"

Garet blinked, glancing to Isaac. "I-I don't know... I can't... Isaac, you decide."

Isaac closed his eyes. There was a weight, much heavier than any sword or cloak, pressing down on his shoulders. He thought of Kraden and Jenna. How long would it take for them to defy Felix? Felix. How long would he be able to protect his sister from Saturos and Menardi? Isaac's hand clenched into fists, and he suppressed a growl. Saturos and Menardi. They did this. *They* were the reason for all this.

Isaac looked up, his face almost twisted in a deep, darkened frown. His blue eyes glittered as he said, "I will."

"Isaac... You can't..." Gareth stared aghast at his best friend, but his grandfather tapped the ground with his cane impatiently.

"You chose to leave your decision for Isaac," he pointed out sternly. "There will be no further discussion."

The Great Healer raised his head, staring up at the ceiling and lifting his arms. "O Wise One," he said in deep, resounding tones, "these two have accepted your quest. Give us your next command!"

What happened next, Isaac couldn't put into words. From the ceiling, a transparent, much smaller image of the Wise

One sunk down, staring at all of them in turn with its one eye. *"You two are quite brave to take on this quest,"* it said, speaking loudly. Everyone in the room stared, amazed, at the stone. *"I shall be watching you. Choose your destiny wisely, young ones."* With that, the image of the Wise One closed its one eye and shrunk down into nothingness.

The Great Healer relaxed, very nearly stumbling into the shrine. After a few moments, the wizened man straightened up and turned to the two boys. "That was the Wise One," breathed Dora, still staring at the place where it had disappeared.

"The Wise One said Isaac must unlock the power," said the Great Healer, breathing deeply. "Find the lighthouses. The Elemental Star you possess will lead the way."

There was a moment's pause as everyone's eyes fell upon the Great Healer. "...Then what?" asked Gareth.

The Great Healer's eyebrows raised, blue eyes falling on Gareth. After a few moments, he stroked his beard. "Seek out the Djinni. They will prove helpful."

There was another long, uncomfortable silence. "Is that all?" asked Dora.

"Yes," replied the old man, inclining his head to her. "That is all."

The mayor stared at the Great Healer in astonishment. "Surely, Great Healer, there must be something else!"

The Great Healer shook his head. "I'm sorry. That's all I can tell you." The old man looked directly at Isaac. "I leave it to you, Isaac. Gareth," he added, doffing his tall, blue hat to them and revealing he was quite bald on top of his head.

Returning his hat back to its place, he walked past them and pushed the stone door of the Sanctum open, leaving them all behind.

The two elders stood staring at the open doorway before mumbling something about meditation and leaving themselves. The mayor was livid, nearly pounding his cane on the stone floor. "Preposterous!" he exclaimed. "Sending off *children* with no help or direction, on a journey that could very well cost them their lives?" He grumbled to himself for a few moments before Dora let out a soft sigh.

"I agree, Mayor, but... They didn't give us any other choice, did they?" Dora looked over to Isaac, and he tried to put on a smile.

"Then, when should they go?" asked the mayor, and Gareth looked up from staring at the floor.

"I don't think they can afford to wait," murmured Dora, looking now to the mayor.

"Tomorrow, then?" offered Gareth's grandfather.

The adults looked to the boys, and they exchanged glances before nodding. "Tomorrow sounds good," said Isaac.

***Chapter 3*: Chapter 2, The Bandits**

Author's Notes: So, yeah, this chapter is only a little bit shorter than the last one and it only took me... A month. Sigh. Anyway, sorry for the long wait. Be sure to read and review, use constructive criticism, and use the links on my profile to follow me on Twitter and YouTube. I would like to thank MagicMissle and Epic Networks for reviewing.

Edit: As of 8/28/2012, I have updated the ending of this chapter and made it much better in my opinion. I've still not started on the next chapter, but next time will have Ivan catching up with Isaac and Garet.

The Bandits and the Mind-Reader

Isaac couldn't remember a night where he'd been so tired and yet so restless at the same time. Garet's entire family (along with the entire village) demanded to be filled in on what happened in Mt. Aleph. Any protestations had been immediately drowned out, and soon they'd relented, deciding it would be better to get the story over with then and there so they weren't held up the next day.

Lying awake in his bed fully clothed, he stared at the hole in the roof that hadn't been fixed yet, where the full moon shined down on him. When he'd come in to go to bed, his mother had already lain down, and didn't respond to him, not that he'd tried too hard to rouse her.

The teenager stood, looking up at the hole, and after a moment, he climbed back onto his bed, grabbing onto the beam and hoisted himself up out of the hole and onto the roof. Standing on the strong hay, Isaac stared more fully at

the white moon, blue eyes glittering like the stars above. Perhaps it was the stress of the coming day, where he'd leave his friends, his mother and his village behind for an unknown amount of time, but he could swear he could almost see the eye of the Wise One staring down at him from the moon.

I'll be watching.

Isaac looked down from the moon, and turned, looking north towards Gareth's house. Blinking, he walked to the apex of his roof, squinting through the darkness. That shock of spiked red hair was unmistakable. How Gareth had gotten out of his house without waking anyone up (since there were no lights shining through the windows), Isaac didn't know. Gareth was sitting with his feet hanging off the edge of the roof, his face buried in his hands.

Straightening up and balancing on his rooftop, he lifted his hand, a yellow glow surrounding his fingers, and a small, glowing rock appeared floating above his palm, illuminating the towheaded boy. After a moment, Gareth looked up. Even from this distance, Isaac could see his friend blinking. Gareth stood, lifting his own hand as a small flame appeared, glowing much brighter and throwing a bright, red light onto one half of his face. Isaac saw that the larger boy's face looked almost twisted in the shadows that cast upon it. In what expression, Isaac couldn't tell from that distance.

"We'll find them, Gareth," whispered Isaac, and as if Gareth heard him even from that distance, the two boys lowered their hands simultaneously, Isaac gripping the now solid stone in his hand, crushing it within his fingers, while Gareth's flame was extinguished, and the darkness seemed to loom even more solidly than usual around them.

Isaac winced as the sun peeked through the hole in his roof, sitting up slowly and rubbing his eyes. "Nngh..." With a sigh, he swung his feet over the side of his bed, fingers running through his hair. When did he come back down to go to bed? Was that interaction with Gareth a dream?

Now that he was awake, he couldn't think of how that could have happened. However, it was only when he reached for his boots that he realized he wasn't wearing them, when he remembered vividly that he'd not taken them off when he'd laid down.

Isaac shook his head, pulling the boots on and standing up, adjusting his yellow scarf on his neck and stretching out his arms. Leaning back, he felt his spine pop in a few places, letting out a soft groan. Grabbing his short sword and the Mythrill bag, he walked across the room, but froze when he felt something crunch under his boot. Looking down, he saw some small pebbles scattered across the floor, and he looked up, through the second hole in the roof and up at the blue sky.

With effort, he looked away from the hole and walked downstairs. Dora lay with her back to the stairs on the bed next to the window. There was a folded pile of shirts and trousers, a thick green traveling vest, a tote bag with a bedroll tied to it, and what looked like several loaves of bread wrapped in very large leaves to keep them fresh on the table in the middle of the room. He stuffed the clothes and bread into the bag, slipped his new vest on, and hefted it onto his shoulder, where it rested on his hip. With a small glance towards his mother, who hadn't stirred, he pushed his front door open, letting it swing closed behind him.

"Oh, Isaac," said a voice, and he turned. Gareth's two sisters and Gareth himself walked around the corner. Gareth was

wearing an identical, while much larger, traveling vest over his shirt. Isaac also noticed Gareth had a backpack that was much larger than his was. The two boys' eyes met for a moment and Isaac knew Gareth remembered what happened last night, too. The two younger girls flanking Gareth didn't make any indication of noticing them.

"You two had better get down to the plaza," said Gareth's youngest sister, smiling up at Isaac. The middle sister nodded.

"Yup. Everyone's down there now, waiting to see you two off," she said. Nodding, Isaac and Gareth turned away from the house and started their slow trek down the stairs south to the plaza.

They were silent for the most part, until they reached the long stairs just before the plaza. "Your Psynergy's gotten better," said Gareth, and Isaac paused, looking over his shoulder at the larger boy, who wasn't really smiling, but there was a small glint in his eye. "Pretty soon, I think you'll be able to summon bigger rocks to crush things." This time, a real grin stretched his lips.

Isaac smiled as well, and the two best friends continued downwards, where they could see the large Psynergy Stone in the middle of the plaza. A very large crowd of people stood before the gate to Vale, and soon Gareth and Isaac were noticed, countless pairs of eyes looking in their direction as they stepped onto level ground. Gareth's grandfather came up to meet them, holding out a rolled up scroll to Isaac, who took it.

"A map," explained the mayor, "to the closest town. It'll take about a night to reach it on foot." Everyone jumped as an

explosion rocked the ground, and they looked up at the peak of Mt. Aleph.

"I imagine," said the Great Healer, "that the volcano will likely make smaller eruptions sporadically for a good while until this is over." The two old men heaved out low sighs, but the mayor recovered first, reaching into his vest and pulling out a pouch that clinked softly as he held it out to Isaac.

"I imagine you'll need some funds," he said. The boy blinked, looking into the pouch. Shining gold coins glinted up at him. "That's two-hundred gold coins."

"Mister Mayor, I can't-"

"You *will*," insisted the old man firmly, frowning down at Isaac. "You need it more than we do."

"You'll also need something else," said another voice, and everyone turned as the blacksmiths emerged from their shop. The older of the two was bald aside from the sides and back of his head and the black beard, while the younger had a full head of brown hair and a large mustache that curled slightly as he smiled. They were holding a large axe and a long sword, respectively. "Isaac," said the younger brother, holding out the sword. "My brother and I spent all night forging these for you. We know you were fond of the axe and sword in there, but we figured you'd like freshly-made steel."

"But-" Isaac stared at the sword. It was twice as long as the sword he already had, and a bit wider as well. "I can't-"

"Like the mayor said," interrupted the older of the two, holding out the axe to Gareth, "you will." The axe wasn't double-sided, but it was almost as tall as Isaac, and made of iron. The handle was wrapped in leather for gripping. Gareth accepted the new weapon, looking almost fit to hug it as he

ran a large hand over the much larger blade. Isaac, setting his bag on the ground and removing his smaller sword, took the new blade, sliding it out of the sheath a few inches. It was made of steel, and felt heavy in his hands. As the boys looked around at the people standing before them, Isaac opened his mouth.

"Isaac, Gareth!" called two more voices, and they turned, spotting Gareth's sisters coming down the stairs. The smaller of the two was holding a length of green beads, and once she'd reached them, she held them out to him. "Auntie Dora told us to give this to you." Accepting the beads, he felt a lump form in his throat as he stared at them. "She didn't tell us what they did, just said they would be useful," said the little girl.

Isaac nodded, turning to a nearby tree, where a large, juicy apple hung down. Wrapping the Catch Beads around his hand, he lifted it and closed his eyes, blue rings forming around his body and a much larger, ghostly white hand reached out to grab the apple, where it fell into Isaac's outstretched hand. "Yeah," he said, his voice soft and almost hoarse. "They will be."

The smaller boy handed his old sword to the armorer, Gareth opting to keep his short sword, mentioning that it might be good backup. The blacksmiths moved out of the boys' way as Isaac and Gareth walked past. The Great Healer held out a bundle himself. "Great Healer," began Isaac, but the old man looked down at him, and his voice faded.

"I feel," said the Great Healer, placing the bundle of green herbs and white bandages in Isaac's hands, "that if your Psynergy is ever drained, these will be quite useful. Just place the herbs on any wounds, and wrap the bandages tightly around them."

Isaac stared around at everyone, his mouth slightly open. "Everyone, I..." Gareth clapped him on the back, shouldering his new axe. "...Thank you."

"Think of these as early gifts for your birthday, Isaac," said the mayor, and Isaac blinked, staring at the old man. "You're seventeen next month, aren't you?" he asked, a wide smile playing across his lips. Gareth let out a soft laugh, while Isaac merely smiled, and nodded.

They walked slowly through the crowd, toward the gate. When they reached it, there was a great shimmering behind them, and they turned. Everyone present, even the mayor and Gareth's sisters, had lifted their hands, where they glowed in a mix of gold and red, some even forming stones or flames, some larger than others, showing the varying strength of all the Adepts present. The two boys stood staring at all of them, their own hands, as they had done last night, rising high over their heads as they did the same.

"All together now!" shouted the mayor.

"*Farewell!!*" yelled everyone present, the sound echoing all around them as they all closed their hands, flames being snuffed out and pebbles falling onto the ground.

Isaac and Gareth stood with their hands clenched into fists as they stared around at all the Adepts around them, both of them looking fit to burst into tears. They turned their backs on everyone, and slowly, they walked away, Isaac looking back once to see a golden light still shimmering high above the plaza, where he could see a little bit of his house.

He felt tears well up in his eyes as he turned away. "Bye, mum."

"Haah!"

Garet brought his axe down upon an enormous rat, slicing it in half. The blade of the axe sunk into the rich earth and he spun around in a small circle, sending a wave of fire over a swarm of bats that had been bearing down on him from behind, where they fell, black and charred with a high-pitched, simultaneous screech. Meanwhile, Isaac sent another rat high into the air with Quake, swinging his new sword around where it sliced through three green Slimes in turn. Unfortunately, a fourth slime landed on his back, and immediately, he felt something burn into his neck. "Garet!"

"On it!" called the larger boy, pitching a fireball at the green creature. There was a high-pitched squeal and a burst of heat upon Isaac's neck as the protuberant eyes of the green, slimy creature went glassy before it slid off to the ground. Isaac brought his boot onto the creature's eyes and it stopped moving. "Mars," groaned Garet, tugging his axe out of the ground and walking up to Isaac, clutching his arm. A rat had snuck up and sunk its teeth deep into his flesh, where it bled pretty freely. "You alright?" he asked.

"I'll live," grumbled Isaac, closing his eyes and placing a glowing hand on Garet's arm. The Mars Adept let out a soothed sigh, and once Isaac removed his hand, the deep wound had faded, leaving only a red stain on his sleeve. Once that was done, Isaac turned his Cure onto his own neck. "Nngh... Why were there bats out in broad daylight?" he asked as they resumed their walk south, stepping over the acidic slime that had managed to get a hit in.

"I dunno," said Garet, shrugging and shouldering his axe as his brown eyes scanned the way ahead. Isaac kept his senses sharp for movement this time, his natural abilities as a Venus Adept allowing him to feel the vibrations upon the

earth of creatures getting too close. It was the only reason they hadn't received more injuries than they had. "I do know that it's bloody ridiculous for us to be barely two hours out Vale's gate and we get attacked, though," he added, rubbing the place where he'd been bitten, even though Isaac knew it didn't even tickle any more.

"I feel like my Psynergy's slowly getting stronger, though," mentioned Isaac. "I dunno, maybe you're right. Maybe I'll be able to summon larger rocks to chuck at things."

"Heh. That'd be nice." Gareth nudged Isaac in the shoulder. "Maybe you'd be good with long range soon so I don't have to keep using my Psynergy to throw fireballs."

"I thought you liked chucking fireballs," teased Isaac, jabbing his taller friend in the ribs playfully with a smirk.

"That's not the point," grunted Gareth, but he was smiling, giving Isaac a shove. They horsed around for a few more minutes until Isaac froze, halfway through sending another playful jab. He'd felt something. There wasn't a breeze or tremor upon the earth, he just felt some sort of power nearby. "What is it?" asked Gareth softly, immediately becoming serious and gripping the handle of his axe.

"I dunno," replied Isaac, and the boys put their backs together. The odd, but very familiar power was getting stronger. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something shimmer and he looked up, spotting something floating above their heads. "What in Venus' name..."

Gareth looked up as well, forming a fireball in his hand and staring up at the thing above them as Isaac gripped the hilt of his sword over his shoulder. "*Wait!*" said a tiny, high-pitched voice. But it didn't sound in Isaac's ear. Instead, he heard it directly in his mind. The shimmering thing above

them expanded and dropped to the ground. Their gazes followed it as it descended, and they could see it in more detail. It was a squat, pudgy creature with brown skin and a cream-colored belly. On its back was some brown spikes jutting out on either side of it like wings while on its head was a pair of fin-like ears. Its tail had a fin on the end of it, but the most striking thing the two of them noticed was the massive pair of solid blue eyes as it stared right at them. *"You can see me?"* it asked.

"Er," said Gareth, keeping a fireball in his hand and looking to Isaac, who as well hadn't removed his hand from the hilt of his sword.

The tiny creature regarded Isaac for a few moments until blue rings formed around its body. Isaac clutched his head as something invaded his mind. It was very brief, and not really painful, but it was very surprising. *"Oh! You're Adepts!"* said the tiny brown creature, the border the stretched from one eye to the other and split where its nose would be and its cream belly curved upwards in what could only have been a pleased smile. *"That's just what I needed!"*

Isaac grimaced. "First things first," he said. "Who, and what, are you?"

"Oh!" it said again, a pink flush darkening its cheeks. *"I haven't introduced myself! I'm Flint, a Venus Djinni!"* Gareth blinked, and finally snuffed out his flame.

"Wait, didn't the Great Healer say we should find these guys?" he asked.

Isaac, still a little upset about having his mind invaded, nodded. "Yeah, but... He didn't say what exactly they *do*... He left that out, interestingly enough."

Flint seemed to smile widely again, lifting up off the ground to rise to Isaac's eye level. *"Well, first things first!"* it squeaked. *"Brace yourself!"*

"Wait, what-" Isaac cut off as the Djinni sunk into the ground at his feet. There was a very brief pause, then a beam of golden light billowed out from under him. Gareth blanched as Isaac's scarf began to billow, even though there wasn't a strong breeze. There was a very strong, very distinct energy rushing up from beneath him, and soon he felt his feet leave the ground, his back arching and his arms spreading wide. Gareth stared, agape as his friend's eyes shone the same gold as the light that enveloped him. Smaller beams of light shot up all around him, forming a large, golden ring that came down, sinking into his forehead.

As soon as it started, it was done, and Isaac fell to the ground on his knees, supporting himself with one hand. There was a few moments of complete silence between them, Isaac being completely still with his back to Gareth. "Isaac?" asked Gareth timidly, reaching out to touch his friend's shoulder. Isaac's eyes were closed.

"I'm... Fine," said Isaac, sounding just as surprised as Gareth, his blue eyes opening as he turned and looked up at the large boy. "What... What happened?"

I've Set with you! said Flint's voice in Isaac's mind again, and he jumped, placing a palm to his forehead. *Oh! Sorry. One moment.* Flint's small, shimmering form appeared before Isaac, and floated, looking slightly sheepish. *"My apologies. I suppose an explanation would suffice, then."*

"Be appreciated," grumbled Gareth, a large hand placing itself upon his hip as he let his axe fall to the ground with a loud thunk.

"Right, well, Djinn are able to join with Adepts in order to increase their powers. What I'd done just a moment ago was Set with Isaac here," he began to explain. Isaac didn't bother asking how Flint knew his name. *"And don't worry; it won't be like that every time I Set, just the first time."*

Isaac looked down at his hands. "So, you're not... Set with me anymore?" he asked.

"Nope!" said Flint cheerfully. *"I'm currently on Standby. When I'm like this, you can call upon me to deliver the wrath of Venus upon a foe! Any one Venus Djinn can do that. Of course, it leaves us exhausted and we'll need to rest within an Adept until we Set once more. If you have more than one Venus Djinn, you'll be able to combine the powers of Venus to deliver something even stronger."*

"This is starting to get a bit long-winded," muttered Gareth softly.

"Well, it's a bit of a long explanation!" snapped Flint, seeming to frown at the Mars Adept. *"It's hard to shorten these things, you know!"*

"Easy," said Isaac soothingly as Gareth opened his mouth to retort. Both of them went silent. After a moment, Isaac turned back to Flint. "What kind of benefits can you give me if you're Set to me?" he asked.

"All kinds!" said Flint excitedly. *"I can increase your physical strength, make your Psynergy more powerful, and even give you more stamina!"* The tiny shimmering creature bounced happily.

"That does sound useful," conceded Isaac, tugging at his scarf thoughtfully.

"Oh, that's not all!" The Djinn was positively wriggling in the air. *"Each Djinn can give the Adept they're Set to a very special ability. Mine is-"* It cut off, turning around in the air as the bushes near by split, a pair of rotting hands pulling them apart. Its mouth hanging wide open, its skin falling apart, it shambled slowly towards them with arms outstretched and a low groan.

"What the hell?" demanded Gareth as Flint zoomed into Isaac's chest, where his body glowed gold briefly.

Actually, let me show you. Isaac felt himself grip the hilt of his sword a bit tighter than he normally could as he drew it, letting out a long, low breath as he stared down the brown monster.

"Gareth, stand back," said Isaac, his scarf billowing out behind him as his sword began to glow a brilliant gold. The larger boy's brown eyes widened as he stared, stepping back from Isaac. *"Flint!"* shouted Isaac, his voice almost echoing all around them, leaping high into air, higher than he'd ever jumped before, holding the shining blade over his head. Gravity took him down, his sword aimed at the zombie below. By sheer luck, it had stumbled backwards, but that didn't mean it was unharmed. Later in life, Gareth would describe the impact as a large, golden explosion that nearly blinded him. And indeed, the undead monster was thrown backwards into large oak tree, leaves falling down on top of it as it sunk to the ground.

Isaac straightened up slowly as Flint reappeared, sitting upon Isaac's shoulder with a smug grin on its otherwise featureless face. *"See?"* Gareth said nothing, merely gaped as his friend.

"Isaac..." The towheaded teenager turned, looking sheepish. "You did say there were more of you, right?" asked Gareth, looking to Flint, who seemed to nod, though it was pretty much all head.

"Yup! One kind for each kind of Adept: Venus, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter. I imagine you'll be looking forward to meeting a Mars Djinni," it said, smirking at Gareth, who smirked unabashedly, but suddenly blanched.

"Look out!" he yelled, but too late. The zombie had gotten up while they were distracted, and sunk its rotten, blunt teeth into Isaac's shoulder. Gareth threw a fireball and the monster released Isaac and stumbled back.

"Flint," gasped Isaac, clutching his bleeding arm. "You said something about summoning, right?" Flint said nothing, and floated into the air before Isaac. The boy felt a power rush past him again, billowing his scarf once more. As the zombie lunged, Isaac, feeling the words burst from his lips, yelled, *"I summon Venus!"* The result was immediate. Flint had flown into the ground at the zombie's feet, and with an *explosion* of the power of Venus, golden energy burst from beneath the zombie. Isaac and Gareth shielded their eyes, and when everything was calm, the zombie had disappeared.

There was silence between the two boys for a long while as they stared at where the zombie had been moments before. "Well," said Gareth, "now we have something for those pesky rats to chew on."

Isaac swung at Gareth's shoulder, but winced, glancing at the place where the zombie had bitten him. "Venus, I hope that thing wasn't poisonous," he grumbled, placing a golden glowing hand on his shoulder. "You were right, Flint, Djinn are helpful." After a few moments, Isaac blinked. "Flint?"

"Isaac, he said Djinn needed rest after they summon, remember?" pointed out Garet, shouldering his axe once more. "Though he didn't say how *long* he needed to rest..."

"Well, he's earned a good rest, I think," said Isaac, smiling as they continued south. "Speaking of which..." Isaac looked up. The sun was starting to dip down. "We've got plenty of time until night, but I'll take first watch when we set up camp."

Both boys jumped as the zombie landed near where it had been launched by Isaac's summon, leaving an unusually large impact crater. It was still and quiet for a long while as the boys stared at it, though Garet brought down his axe upon the creature's neck "just to make absolutely sure this time".

The boys laid out their bedrolls a few hours later as the sun started dipping below a mountain range to the west. They had been walking east for a little while, dispatching various monsters here and there. According to the map they'd received from the mayor, they were only another day away from the next town. And as the Great Healer had said, they felt the unmistakable rumble underfoot of the mountain they'd left behind and loud crashes of massive stones landing meters away.

In the end, they'd decided to set up camp below some trees of some nearby woods. It wouldn't offer a whole lot of protection, but it was better than nothing. Isaac gathered fallen leaves and branches, Garet cutting them up with his axe to make them manageable and setting them in the circle of stones Isaac had found as well.

"Remember, Gareth, make it relatively small. We don't want this wood to go up in smoke," informed Isaac, and Gareth rolled his eyes.

"I *know*, mother." Pointing his palm at the pile of firewood, Gareth shot a relatively small ball of flame at it, and a fire burst to life as if it'd been burning for hours. "I swear, you'd think I was about set my roof on fire."

"Again," added Isaac, receiving a punch to his shoulder as he laughed, pulling out a loaf of bread. "I'm impressed, though. You actually managed a small flame. All we've got for now is bread," he said, splitting one large loaf in half and handing it Gareth, who shrugged.

"Better than nothing. I doubt a giant rat is really too edible." The boys sat in silence for a long time as stars began to twinkle through the leaves above them. "This is gonna take a long time, isn't it?" asked Gareth softly, holding his half-eaten bread in his hand.

"I don't know," replied Isaac, taking a bite of his own bit of bread and staring deep into the flames. Gareth had done the same, letting out a deep sigh. Isaac didn't know how long they simply sat into the night, but once Gareth had finally laid down in his bedroll and rolled over, it was quite dark all around them.

You could have tried to comfort your friend, said a small voice in Isaac's mind. Flint emerged, dropping to the ground and staring up at Isaac with his solid blue eyes. *"He likely doesn't want to admit it, but he's probably scared."*

"Anything I could say wouldn't have given him peace of mind," said Isaac softly, glancing over his shoulder at Gareth, who'd shifted ever so slightly in his bedroll, his sword and axe resting beside him. "And I couldn't bring myself to tell

him we'll find Jenna and Kraden and be back in Vale before summer. Truth is, this journey won't be easy. For either of us. We both know it. And that's about all we know for sure." Isaac stared straight ahead into the trees without really seeing anything there, his hand pressed to the ground he sat on so that if anything did try to attack them, he'd feel it. "I don't want to lie to my best friend and give him false hope."

Flint was still staring at him, tilted slightly to one side as if thinking about what Isaac had said. *"You're very noble, Isaac,"* said the small creature before setting itself back within Isaac and going silent. Isaac knew Flint could have kept talking if it so wanted, but he was glad it hadn't.

A few hours later, he woke up Gareth for his watch and curled up in his bedroll, soon falling asleep without talking to his friend.

The next morning came without much incident; The fire had died down to small embers and Isaac snuffed the rest of it out with a pile of dirt. Once they were both awake and had a small breakfast of fruit and bread, they resumed their trek east. "So, what does the map say?" asked Gareth after a long walk of silence.

Isaac was poring over the unrolled parchment in his hands. "The next town should be over this hill coming up here," he said, pointing. It was a pretty large hill, to be sure, and it took them a good ten minutes to find level ground. Once they did, they looked down. "It doesn't say the name of the town, though, just that it's there." Isaac pointed, and sure enough, in the distance was a quaint little village. It was a fair bit smaller than Vale, but it had a good size to it, with natural cliff walls rising above the houses in the middle. A

single house rested on the level ground near the northern side of the town, and from what they could see from their position high above, it looked a fair bit larger than the other houses and buildings within.

Once the two boys reached the foot of the hill, they paused as a convoy of four caravans exited the southern gate of the town. Isaac and Gareth were too far away to hear anything said, but from the looks of it, the two men in the lead caravan were arguing. It was a brief argument, however, as two massive rocks landed meters away from the lead horse, the driver being forced to calm it down. Isaac and Gareth turned, barely able to see the tip of Mt. Aleph in the far distance.

"I know that it's really dangerous and horrible," said Gareth, "but that's really impressive that Mt. Aleph can lob giant rocks from that far away..." The two boys exchanged looks, Isaac shaking his head as the line of caravans rolled away, down south. "I wonder where they're going," added Gareth, watching the caravans disappear into the distance as he and Isaac walked toward the town.

"Who knows." Isaac rolled his shoulders, grunting softly. "I imagine they think they're better off at least away from giant rocks falling on their heads. I'm just hoping this town is far enough away that-" Isaac paused again, spotting the caravans coming right back and rolling past them as they traveled up north instead. They got a good look at the leader. He was a tall man with red and yellow robes that looked quite expensive. The man also had a worried, apprehensive look on his face. "Strange... You think something is wrong down south?" he asked Gareth, who shrugged. Finally, they reached the south gate and walked under a bridge that connected two parts of the cliffs.

Now that they were in it, Isaac could now see the town in more detail. There were a few houses out in the open, including an inn and a larger house up a staircase on the cliff that Isaac could only assume was the town mayor's abode. Set into the tall walls that hid most of the town from view were some doors with signs above them indicating an armory and general store. "We could probably get some supplies later," mentioned Isaac. "First, I think we'll need some directions to the first lighthouse..."

As they passed by the inn, they paused a few moments to listen to a pair of people talking near a ladder that lead to the roof. "...the Sanctum is missing its stature, *and* we won't get a delivery of hay until the eruptions have faded," a young man was saying, resting against the ladder with a deep frown. "We'll have a hole in the roof for a while."

"That's not good," muttered the woman next to him, frowning up at the edge of the roof. "I hope the eruptions fade soon, then..." Averting their gazes, Gareth and Isaac walked on, toward the stairs that lead up to the mayor's house, both of them noticing a guy watching them with a narrowed gaze from the top of the cliff nearest the inn, where a small tree stood.

That's slightly suspicious, thought Isaac. The man above them wore decidedly odd clothes; Purple tunic with a white undershirt, dark violet trousers and a slightly brighter colored headband. The man fingered a short, thin blade on his hip as he averted his gaze once Isaac and Gareth reached the mayor's front door.

Exchanging a brief glance, Gareth set the bladed end of his axe onto the ground as Isaac reached up to knock on the door. A completely bald head, a single brown eye and a white mustache that was equal parts impressive and

ridiculous greeted them through the gap in the door. "Yes?" asked a voice nervously, eyeing the weapons the teenagers held with definite nervousness

"Mr. Mayor," began Isaac, "I hope we're not bothering you, but my partner and I are travelers." The old man seemed to relax. Slightly. "We'd like any information you could give us towards our destination, if you could, sir."

The three stood still for a few more moments before the mayor's mustache bristled in a relieved smile and he stepped back, opening the door a little wider. "Wipe your feet," he instructed with a chuckle. "Oh," he added to Garet, "leave your axe at the door, please."

"Yes, sir," replied the large boy respectfully, doing as he was told once they were inside. The mayor's house was quite nice, Isaac thought. Like the rest of the town, it was still a bit quaint, though it was definitely in a bit of a state, to say the least. "What happened here?" asked Garet, a middle-aged woman looking up from sweeping some debris across the floor into a heap.

"Don't mind the mess," said the old man, trying to sound jovial, but Isaac could see the wizened face was slightly contorted in sadness. "I'm sure you've heard of the rocks falling from the sky..." The old man turned to a large table, sifting through a stack of papers. "Thankfully, no one was hurt... But, there have been disappearances for certain items..." The mayor had his back to them as he spoke, a pair of young children watching the teenagers curiously. Isaac and Garet smiled kindly to them. "My family urn... The Sanctum's statue... Anyway," the old man paused from his perusals to turn to them, looking sheepish, "pardon me, I'm looking for something but haven't asked what you need..." But Isaac wasn't paying any more attention as he noticed

another young, blond boy step up, lean against the dining table and very nonchalantly lift a glowing hand and close a pair of purple eyes as a series of blue rings surrounded his body.

That's a Jupiter Adept! said Flint's voice in his mind, though it was drowned out as he once again felt something else invade his thoughts.

The shorter boy's violet eyes opened again as he stared up at Isaac. "Psynergy?" he asked. Garet was staring at the boy as well as the mayor looked between the three of them, apparently having not noticed the shimmering lights the boy had just given off, and was doing it all over again, eyes closing once more. "Isaac and Garet..."

"Oh, Ivan," said the mayor, seemingly oblivious to the boy once again invading Isaac's mind. "You've met the travelers." Ivan wasn't looking at the mayor. Instead, he continued to stare unblinkingly at Isaac with an almost reverent gaze as, for the third time, he closed his eyes to gaze into Isaac's mind again. Isaac backed out of Ivan's range, and the boy blinked. "Ivan's master had also been burgled," the mayor was saying, reaching out to pat Ivan on the shoulder as Isaac and Garet stared agape at the boy. "Master Hammet had his Rod stolen yesterday while the rocks fell." The mayor heaved a great sigh, turning to Garet. "Anyway, what did you need?" he asked.

"Er," said Garet, looking away from Ivan now. The smaller boy turned away from them and walked to the far corner of the house, looking a little downcast. "We're looking for any lighthouses nearby." The mayor twirled his mustache as he watched Ivan.

"I'll look through my records," said the mayor, turning to the papers again. "This may take a while, mind you."

"Fair enough, sir," said Isaac, who continued to watch Ivan. The smaller boy was sitting on his bed in the corner of the room. "Is it okay if we go talk to... Ivan, was it?"

"Oh, please do," said the mayor, looking over his shoulder at the boys with a smile that seemed to make his mustache curl even more. "Ivan doesn't have very many friends, and he's been so depressed ever since he got his master's Rod stolen. Perhaps you can cheer him up."

Garet raised an eyebrow at Isaac, who returned the look with a sheepish shrug, as they walked toward the back of the house. Now that Isaac was looking, he saw that Ivan was much smaller than either of them, wearing a brown tunic and a circlet on his head. There was also a green cape hanging on a hook on the wall beside the bed. The boys stepped up to Ivan, Isaac opening his mouth to speak. "You could tell when I was reading your mind, couldn't you?" asked Ivan, looking up at the two of them with his large purple eyes. Isaac closed his mouth, and nodded after a long moment. "Is this... Power really all that scary?" continued the small boy, his eyes now looking down at his hands with a frown.

"Well..." Isaac and Garet exchanged looks as Isaac reached for words. "Well, not really," said Isaac, and Ivan blinked, looking up again. Isaac's voice dropped into a quiet mutter. "I mean, I make pillars of earth pop out of the ground and Garet here chucks fireballs..." Ivan's eyes briefly met with Garet's, the larger boy seeming to refrain from blanching away from Ivan to keep from hurting the smaller boy's feelings. "I mean, being able to read someone's mind probably isn't that much more odd than... Look." Isaac held

out a hand. "You look like you could use some help. Gareth and I are kind of... Stuck here until we get the information we need."

"Yeah, you're... Looking for something, right?" asked Ivan, looking between the two of them again. Isaac couldn't help but notice that Ivan didn't seem to need to... Blink quite as often when he wasn't closing his eyes in order to read Isaac's mind. "I didn't get the entire story, but... I think you would prefer I stay out of the wrinkles of your mind for now." Ivan let his lips curl upwards in the first real smile Isaac saw the boy give as he looked at Isaac's gloved hand. "So are you... Offering to help me?"

"Yeah," said Gareth, only slightly hesitantly, Isaac ignoring the glance his friend was giving him again. "The Mayor said something about your Master Hammet's... Uh, Rod?" he added, scratching the back of his head.

"Yeah, you heard that right," said Ivan, looking at his hands again. "Master Hammet left for Tolbi to the south, but he left me here to get his treasure, a staff called the Shaman's Rod. It's got some sort of old power to it. It's my fault it got taken, so it's my duty to my master to find it again." Ivan's unblinking gaze returned to Isaac's outstretched hand. "But I don't want to sound ungrateful to your offer to assist me, so..." Ivan grasped Isaac's hand and stood up, once again giving a small grin. "...Thank you."

"No problem, Ivan," said Isaac. "So, how do you know how to use Psynergy, out of curiosity?" he asked once Ivan had let go and was pulling on his cape.

"I've always been able to read minds, but this is the first time someone has caught me in the act," replied Ivan, blushing. "Are you sure... You're not uncomfortable with it?"

"Nah," said Gareth, though Isaac could tell it wasn't completely true. Both of the other boys glanced at Gareth, who scratched the back of his head again. "Okay, yeah, you have to admit, it's a little weird. My ability to pitch fireballs at giant rats notwithstanding." Ivan gazed at Gareth for a few more moments, and the larger boy continued. "*But*, I can see how something like that would be really useful, though! I may not be the sharpest axe on the rack, but... Y'know, as long as you use it for good and not..."

"...Try to read your and Isaac's minds again?" asked Ivan, actually smiling again. "Believe me; I learned early on that some things are not meant to be learned through reading someone's mind." The small boy picked up a short walking stick, twirling it in his fingers briefly, and Isaac caught a look of a boy who wasn't quite as innocent as he ought to be. "I do try to keep out of the more secret corners of people's minds these days, only getting information I'd simply get through conversation. But, I think this will be okay," he continued, looking to Isaac and Gareth again. "We're trying to find thieves, after all. Surely that's not as bad as just going around randomly reading people's minds." A small blush crept upwards from Ivan's neck to his cheeks.

Isaac and Gareth actually exchanged a smile this time, and Gareth reached out, clapping Ivan on the shoulder. The small boy nearly pitched forward onto his face. Isaac had a vivid recollection of Kraden from what seemed like so long ago, even though it was just a couple days.

"Surely, that would be acceptable!"

Letting out a tiny sigh, he shook his head. "Do you have any leads at the moment, Ivan?" asked Isaac as the smaller boy recovered.

"Well..." Ivan reached up, tugging on a lock of his hair on his forehead. "Maybe. There are some more travelers in the inn, who had been here when the rocks started falling, and haven't left yet."

"It's a start," mused Isaac, and the three boys turned, walking across the house to leave.

"Going out, Ivan?" asked the mayor, looking over his shoulder at them with a smile. "Don't be out too late; My daughter is making dumplings tonight."

"Thank you, sir," said Ivan as Gareth grabbed his axe and left the house. Once again, the three of them got eyed by the strange purple-clad man on the top of the cliff, who was frowning. "That's one of them there," breathed Ivan to Isaac, who nodded. "For some reason, these guys tend to avoid me when I get close enough to read their minds."

"I can't imagine why," said Gareth innocently, picking off a bit of dirt from his axe, only to get a punch to the shoulder for his troubles by Isaac.

"One thing you need to learn about us," said Isaac, patting Ivan on the head. "I'm the sensible one; Gareth's the big lovable lug. Don't take him seriously unless we're in a fight."

"Do you think it'll come to that?" asked Ivan as they entered the inn, blinking up at Isaac, who let out a sigh.

"I don't know. If we confront these guys, they might try to attack us, but let's just try to be as sensible as possible here." Ivan talked to the woman behind the desk as Gareth and Isaac set their weapons on a rack beside the door.

"Alright, the other two guys are upstairs," said Ivan, and the three walked up to the second floor. Like most inns, this one

had a hallway that lead to two large rooms with multiple beds; One for men and the other for women. The ceiling was a bit low, with solid boards likely being extra help in keeping the rain from soaking the patrons if the hay roof didn't quite manage it. Peeking into the room, Ivan said, "Yeah, those are the guys. How are we gonna go about this?"

Isaac peeked over Ivan's shoulder, rubbing his chin. "We'll have to very casually and carefully block them from escaping the room and give Ivan time to read their minds." A man identical to the other who had watched them from on top of the cliff was talking to another, taller man. This guy was pale, with long brown hair, a yellow scarf like Isaac's, only shorter, and decidedly orange and brown attire, as opposed to the purple of varying shades of his comrades.

"How are we gonna do that?" asked Gareth, peeking in over Isaac, who leaned back and frowned, closing his eyes as he thought, tugging on his scarf.

"Garet could block the doorway," suggested Ivan. "Of course, it'll only deter them briefly. We can't stop them from outright leaving if they so wanted."

"Hopefully that'll give you time to read their minds," muttered Isaac, who peeked into the room again. "Alright, hopefully that'll work. Here's what we'll do..."

A few moments later, Isaac and Ivan walked into the room. "Here you are," said Ivan, indicating the room at large to the two taller boys. The men already inside blanched at the sight of Ivan, though when Gareth, looking quite tired, leaned against the frame of the doorway and put his foot on the other side, they stayed where they were, sitting on opposite beds.

Isaac distinctly heard the one clad in purple hiss, "They've got that weird kid with them!"

"Thanks, Ivan," said Isaac, walking to the bed opposite the apparent leader, sitting beside the other, who immediately moved to sit beside the taller of the two as Ivan turned to talk to Gareth. The suspicious men seemed to relax as Ivan kept his distance. "Traveling can be hard sometimes," Isaac said wearily, pulling up a leg to rub his foot, smiling to the two men, who stiffened slightly.

"Yeah," said the leader slowly, narrowing his eyes at Isaac. Ivan was still talking to Gareth in an undertone, the other man looking away from him to mirror his leader. "It can."

"What are you so nervous about?" asked Isaac, raising an eyebrow at the men before leaning forward to speak in an undertone. "Is it that kid?" Isaac jerked his head slightly toward Ivan. "Don't worry, he's a little creepy, but he's nice enough, though..." Isaac's voice dropped into a tiny whisper, the men leaning forward to hear him. "I swear, sometimes I think that kid can read my mind."

Again, the men relaxed, the leader even cracking a smile. As the three spoke, Ivan was facing Gareth, who was still acting like a road-weary traveler, rubbing his knee. Isaac let out a loud laugh, causing the other two to laugh with him. "He'd better not have told that story about the rats that made a nest in my mum's dresser," muttered Gareth. Isaac snickered, tugging his scarf off and rubbing his neck. "That's the signal; Go on."

Ivan crept up to the men's bed where they now had their backs to him. "...and the big things almost seemed to explode out of the drawer right onto his head," Isaac was saying, the men letting out amused laughter at the story.

"You should have seen his face!" As Isaac imitated much flailing about and silent screaming, causing the men to nearly collapse in laughter, Ivan lifted a hand as blue rings surrounded his body. "What about you?" asked Isaac. "I hope you haven't gotten into anything as dangerous as that."

The men snickered, shaking their heads. "Nah, nothing quite that... Well, *terrifying*." The leader turned to send a sneer in Gareth's direction, but blinked. "Wait, where's..." The other man jumped up.

"It's that freaky kid!" he exclaimed, and the leader jumped up as well.

"Just what are you tryin' to pull?" demanded the leader, turning from Ivan to Isaac and back again. Ivan was crouching, and after a few moments, he held up a golden coin.

"You dropped this," he said.

There was a few moments' uneasy silence before the tall man grabbed the coin out of Ivan's hand and the smaller boy turned away to walk back towards Gareth. Isaac sat a little longer before slapping his forehead. "Oh, right. Gareth, we should get to the general store and buy some herbs before we forget." Isaac stood up, tying his scarf back around his neck as Gareth let out a groan.

"Really? I was just getting relaxed."

"Come on, there's that really cute girl there that seemed to like you when you walked past," said Isaac, taking Gareth's shoulder and leading him out of the room, Ivan following behind. Isaac didn't look back at the men, but he had a sinking feeling that they hadn't been completely convinced.

Back outside, Garet and Isaac turned to Ivan. "Well?"

"It was them, alright," said Ivan, letting out a sigh. "They took a lot of things from the town, including the Shaman's Rod, and hid them all somewhere in the inn. I didn't get to see exactly where, though. They kinda... Found me out before I could get that..."

"Sorry," said Isaac.

"Don't worry about it. At least we know the vague area."

"Why can't we just tell the mayor?" asked Garet, shouldering his axe again.

"Because we don't have proof they did anything," said Isaac, twisting the end of his scarf in his hands.

"Yeah, we'll have to find where they hid the stuff," added Ivan tugging on a lock of his hair again, apparently deep in thought.

The three turned, spotting the woman at the bottom of the ladder that had been talking to the man about the roof.

"Where is he?" she was saying with a frown. "If he's with that woman from the general store again..." The woman stalked off, and the three boys all looked at the ladder.

"Hey..." Isaac looked to Ivan. "Did you notice that the ceiling was a little low in the second floor?"

"Yeah..." Ivan glanced to Garet, who shrugged.

"A lot of ceilings are low for me," muttered the large teenager. "I didn't really..."

"Come on," said Isaac, pulling himself onto the ladder and climbing up to the roof. "Yeah, there's a big hole here. Big enough for Gareth. Come on up!" By the time Ivan had dropped into the hole, none of them noticed that the suspicious man on the cliff had disappeared from his position.

"Wow," said Isaac, looking around. They were in what appeared to be an attic, with an inch of dust almost carpeting the floor under their feet. Isaac could see the thatched hay from the inside now, the vertical walls reaching up a few feet before turning into the diagonal ceiling. Unfortunately, the room they were currently in was empty, save for a large crate. "Hm," mused the Venus Adept, kneeling down and pressing his hand to the floor. "There's something else here."

"What?" asked Gareth, straightening up and listening intently. "Hey, yeah, there's some sort of snuffling noise over here." The larger boy walked over to the crate, pressing his ear to it. "It sounds too big to be a rat, though."

Ivan stepped forward as well. "Do you think there's something behind it?" he asked.

"One way to find out," said Isaac, walking up to the crate himself. "Gareth, help me-" But with a crack, Isaac's foot fell through the floor, Gareth catching him and pulling him up before backpedaling away from the crate. "Okay." Ivan, Gareth and Isaac stared at the hole that was now underfoot.

"Now what?" asked Ivan.

"Easy," said Isaac, rolling a shoulder and standing up again. Planting his feet solidly on the floor, he lifted a hand that began to give off a golden light, and blue rings surrounded his body. A much larger, white hand pressed against the

crate, and after a few moments, he heaved, and the crate slid over, revealing a small doorway.

"Wow," said Ivan, blinking. "...I can't do that."

"Nah, it's mainly for Mars and Venus Adepts," said Isaac, hopping over the new hole in the floor. "Come on." Following Isaac's lead, they entered a new, larger room with many crates and barrels all around. "Wow, these guys were busy," he remarked. In one corner of the room, the young man they saw at the ladder earlier that day sat wriggling with a gag and ropes tied around his wrists and ankles. Garet immediately got to work in cutting him loose.

"Hey, this is some nice rope," he said, tucking the rope into his vest as Isaac pulled the man up to his feet.

The man rubbed the back of his head, wincing as he looked at the three teenagers. "What happened?" asked Ivan as Isaac looked around a bit more.

"I'd come up here to check the damage," the man explained, "and ended up in here. I'd always noticed the second floor's ceiling was a little low. I had no idea there was actually an attic up here." The man swayed, Isaac catching him around the shoulders. "Ugh... When I got in here... Somebody hit me from behind. I woke up here... Tied up, and..."

"Looks like we've been found out." Everyone froze, turning to the door, where three very familiar men walked in, the taller of them drawing a thin, curved blade. "Not bad for one of Hammet's whelps, brat," the leader said to Ivan. Isaac saw that the small boy had narrowed his eyes, and there was a definite spark in Ivan's eyes that Isaac hadn't seen before.

"I have to return the artifact you stole from him," said Ivan, taking a step forward.

"We're the least of Hammet's worries," said one of the twins to the leader's left, holding onto the hilt of his blade. "I saw him heading north, to Lunpa."

Ivan and the man Gareth untied both took in deep gasps. "Lunpa?" demanded the man in Isaac's arms.

"What's wrong with Lunpa?" asked Gareth, the grip on his axe tightening.

The other twin was grinning nastily, one hand stuck into the violet vest he wore. "That's the region named after the noble thief, Lunpa."

"Humble guy," muttered Isaac, blue eyes narrowing as he looked between the three men. He thought he might have imagined it, but it also appeared that the sword the leader was wielding almost seemed to glow a soft light.

The taller leader picked his fingernails carelessly with the tip of his sword. "His son Donpa carried on his legacy, but Dodonpa..." All three of the thieves smirked malevolently. "Rumors of his viciousness reaches even the edge of the world, I hear." Isaac lowered the dizzy man slowly to the ground, placing a glowing hand on his head as the leader of the thieves kept talking. "So, really, we're not so bad. If we give everything back, will you let us leave?"

Isaac blinked, straightening up again and staring at the leader, who adopted a smile that he no doubt intended to be friendly but instead came off as more malevolent than before. "Excuse me?" asked Isaac, and the thieves' smiles faded. "You stand here, in the middle of a pile of stuff you took from homes *in the middle of a crisis*, and you want to be *let go*?"

"Come on!" shouted the leader angrily. "Even if we give everyone their stuff back, it's still a crime?"

"...Yeah," said Gareth, who was probably relishing in the chance to speak to someone as if they were slow.

The thieves' faces twisted in darkened grimaces, the leader's grip on his shimmering sword tightening. "Well, then..." The twins in purple behind him exchanged glances, the one with his hand in his tunic shifted ever so slightly. "... I guess we'll just have to keep you quiet," said the leader, his voice dropping into a deep growl.

The thief behind the leader pulled out something small, grey and round, lifting it high over his head. "Move!" yelled Isaac as the thief threw the object to the ground, where it exploded, and thick smoke filled the room. Isaac, Ivan and Gareth coughed and choked. They were all blind to everything around them, a heavy thud indicating that Gareth had tripped on something. Isaac felt his lungs burning and his eyes watering. Thundering footsteps were getting closer, so he lifted his sword up to block any attack that might come.

Suddenly, something blew past Isaac's hair, billowing his scarf out behind him. A whooshing noise filled the room and soon the thick smoke was pulled into a large cyclone and away from everyone present. Isaac, and everyone else, looked over to Ivan, who had raised his walking stick, his hands glowing with a violet light. Once the smoke was gone, the small boy's unblinking glare rested on the thief that had charged him after throwing the smoke bomb. A crackle of electricity arced across Ivan's fingers and he thrust his hand forward, a purple bolt colliding with the thief's stomach.

Breaking out of his brief trance, Isaac turned to the bandit leader, who hadn't recovered from the, well, shock of seeing Ivan's powers. *Flint, get ready*, thought Isaac, and he heard a noise of affirmation in his head. *Not as powerful this time, okay? Just enough to break his sword.*

Isaac rushed forward, his sword now giving off a bright gold light. The light caught the leader's eyes, and he lifted it to block Isaac's blow. "*Flint!*" yelled Isaac, his voice echoing unnaturally as he lifted his glowing blade over his head, and brought it down upon the thief's own sword. The thief was brought to his knees, and the two sharp lengths of steel clanged together with a sound like a thunderclap, but the leader's sword didn't break. Instead, the tall leader angled the sword so that Isaac's own blade deflected off and sunk into the wooden floor.

"That's an enchanted blade!" shouted Flint as he appeared, floating and shimmering in the air.

Garet, who had been doing his best to dodge and block his opponent and keep him at a distance with his superior ranger, brought down his axe upon the violet twin's sword as well, with better results than Isaac's attempt. Unfortunately, the broken blade whipped off to sink into the larger teenager's shoulder. "Aaagh!" cried Garet, stumbling back from the thief and dropping his axe. The thief, taking this opportunity to draw a shorter, but no less deadly dagger from his tunic, lunging at Garet, who simply used his uninjured arm to punch the thief in the nose to give him a chance to tug the blade out of his flesh.

The thief, his nose dripping with blood now, clutched his face with one hand, reaching into his tunic to pull out another weapon, but Garet, a dark grimace twisting his long face, formed a fireball in his hand and hurled it at the thief.

The thief's tunic caught, and with a loud bang, the thief seemed to explode in a better-contained cloud of thick smoke, and he fell, coughing and spluttering. Gareth, clutching his arm, stepped back, leaning against the wall with a pained groan. The broken blade had gone quite deep.

Since Isaac was preoccupied with the leader, he couldn't spare a moment to heal Gareth, and he was less than useful right now due to his only offensive Psynergy was Quake, and the floor of the attic was only a few inches thick. Even less help was Flint, who had resigned himself to sitting pretty on Isaac's shoulder and shout at the thieves' leader as he and Isaac crossed swords. If the leader could actually hear Flint, he made no indication of it.

Meanwhile, Ivan was going a very good job in avoiding the other twin, who had recovered from being struck by lightning fairly quickly, due to his small size and being quite quick on his feet. Unfortunately, this meant he was spending much more time dodging without the chance to retaliate in any way. Finally, he found an opening, swinging his wooden staff around at the thief's head, but the man simply lifted his sword, the momentum of Ivan's swing making the stick get sliced cleanly in half, the top half bouncing off the thief's shoulder.

With a malevolent grin, the thief kicked Ivan hard in the stomach, sending the light boy falling back and landing at Gareth's feet, winded. As the violet twin ran at Ivan with his sword raised, Ivan send another bolt, and thief backpedaled, a dark smoking burn on the wooden floor where he'd been just moments before. "Here," said Gareth, drawing the short sword he'd gotten from home and handing it off to Ivan, whose need for something to defend himself was greater than Gareth's.

Ivan climbed back to his feet, holding his new blade – rather awkwardly – and ran forward to clash with the thief again.

Isaac pushed the bandit leader away, a shallow cut seeping blood from under his left eye. The thieves' leader was panting, his grip upon his shimmering blade tightening. With a growl, the leader ran forward, Isaac preparing himself to defend against the attack, but suddenly, there was a bright flash of white light as the blade sliced through the air much more quickly than Isaac had expected, knocking his long sword out of his hand. The thief swung a second time, and it was only Isaac's new vest, which was much thicker than his undershirt, that kept him from being mortally wounded, though now there was a long, deep cut across his chest. The teenager fell heavily to the ground clutching at his chest with a gasp. With a triumphant yell, the thief raised his sword, intent on stabbing Isaac while he was down.

A ball of flame collided with the leader's arm, catching his sleeve on fire. The thief stumbled back from Isaac as Gareth, despite his bleeding arm, pitched a second fireball, but this time the leader stumbled back, avoiding it just in time. Distracted by Gareth, he wasn't able to see the third lightning bolt coming, where it slammed into his back, sending him falling flat onto his face. Isaac, pressing a glowing hand to his chest, took that moment to kick the shimmering blade out of the thief's hand.

The twin whose smoke bombs all exploded in his tunic due to Gareth's fireball was climbing to his feet, but Gareth, who had the air of having quite enough of this fight, pulled his leg back, kicking the thief in the chin like a ball and sending him flying back into the wall, where he slumped to the ground. Similarly, Ivan summoned another cyclone that

spun the other twin around a few times before blowing him back to his brother.

Isaac, still healing himself, stared down at the thieves' leader, who gazed right back, reaching into his tunic. "You lost. Give up now," said Isaac. Not listening, the thief stood, drawing a dagger like his comrade had done and lunged at Isaac. The teenager gripped his hand into a fist as his eyes began to glow in a bright golden light. "I warned you." Flint, who had fallen off of Isaac, flew up into the air, its shimmering body spinning before sinking into the floor at the thief's feet. "*Venus!*" he yelled, his voice once again echoing.

The resulting explosion, though much weaker than it had been against the zombie the first time he'd used it, still blew the leader back, just like his comrades, where he slumped in between them, clutching himself with a pained, twisted expression. The twins, one of them still wheezing from inhaling so much smoke, stared terrified up at the three boys as they stepped forward, looking right back down at them. "They... G-got us," hacked the smoked thief, coughing violently afterwards.

The leader grunted painfully, grimacing as he clutched his ribs. By the way he was moving, Isaac guessed that a few were broken. "You did it!" said a voice behind the boys, and they jumped, having quite forgotten about the man who had been ambushed earlier. "I... I gotta get the mayor!" Without another word, the man ran out of the room, and a loud crash indicated he'd fallen through the hole in the room just outside. There was a few moments' silence, then, "I'm okay! I fell on a bed!"

"Ugh," grunted the leader again, "after all the trouble of stealing all this stuff..."

Isaac stepped over to Garet, pressing a glowing hand to his shoulder. Sneering at the man, Garet said, "Haven't you heard? Stealing is a crime!" Isaac rolled his blue eyes, turning to Ivan once he was done.

"You alright, Ivan?" he asked, the smaller boy picking up the shimmering blade the thief had, looking it over with that odd unblinking gaze he normally sported.

"Hmm?" he asked, turning his violet eyes on Isaac instead. "Oh, I'm fine. Just bruised."

"...told you we should've skipped town," the other twin was saying to the leader. "We were here too damn long!"

"Shut up!" shouted the leader, then he winced, curling his legs inwardly, clutching his ribs.

"So, what should we do with them?" asked Garet, rolling his shoulder and taking a moment to picking his axe back up, as well as receiving his sword from Ivan. "You keep it," he added, indicating the shimmering blade. "It'll probably serve you better than them."

Isaac's eyes fell upon the leader again, and after a moment, the boy kneeled down, reaching out to him. "Don't touch me!" he said, trying to put some distance between them.

"Hold still," Isaac said firmly, placing two glowing hands on the leader's sides. Bone almost audibly stitched back together, and the thief gasped softly, then relaxed, though only a little bit. "Your ribs are healed now, but only so they're not broken. I don't want you attacking us again."

With a look of deepest loathing, the leader turned sulkily away from Isaac as the boy straightened back up to his feet. "Since that's over," said Ivan, taking the time to remove the

sheath from the leader's belt for his new weapon, possibly adding insult to injury, "I guess now's a good time to get Master Hammet's Rod and I'll be on my way." Ivan turned violet eyes onto Isaac again, his head tilting slightly to one side. "What will you two be doing?"

"We'll have to go after Felix and the others soon, if the mayor has his files in order," said Isaac, tuning to Gareth, who nodded. Ivan stared for a moment longer, his blonde head tilting into the other direction. The small boy hesitated in lifting his hand, but his eyes closed as blue rings surrounded his body again, aiming a glowing palm at Isaac.

"Hold on a sec-" Gareth reached out to place a hand on Ivan's shoulder, but cut himself off, blinking as Isaac felt Ivan invading his mind again. "What...?"

After a moment, Ivan stepped back, as did Isaac, though Gareth simply blinked, staring down at his gloved hand before turning to Isaac. "I see..." The two boys turned to Ivan, who looked slowly between Isaac and Gareth with his almost reverent gaze again before reaching up to tug on a lock of his hair again. "So much happened to you two..."

Gareth turned and opened his mouth to say something to Isaac, but he was interrupted. "Watch your step, Mr. Mayor, there's a hole." The man they'd saved earlier emerged into the room, followed by the mayor, his mustache, and two large, heavysset men, one of whom holding some ropes in his hands.

The mayor's mustache bristled as he huffed angrily. "Horrible behavior!" he shouted. "Stealing during a crisis?"

"Hey, don't blame us!" yelled one of the twins, wincing as he sat up. "You're the ones who left your doors open! You were

practically begging to get your – Ow!" One of the large men's feet "accidentally" dug into the thief's ribs.

"Oops," said the large man with a glinting smirk.

"You're going away for a very long time," said the Mayor, turning to the man who had the ropes, who nodded. The mayor turned to the three Adepts with a much kinder smile now. "Would you mind helping us tie them up?"

Once the thieves had been pulled to their feet, though their ankles and wrists tied in a way so that they could walk but couldn't run, they were all grumbling quite angrily. The leader's gaze fell upon Isaac. "You... I won't forget this! One day I'll run you through!" As the two large men started to push the thieves through the doorway – another loud crash indicating that one of the thieves had fallen through the hole – Isaac simply smiled.

"I'll be looking forward to it!" he called.

"Well," said the mayor, looking around at the three boys before glancing at the various crates around them. The man who had been tied up earlier was looking through everything. "What all has been found, Samson?"

"A lot of stuff," said Samson, pulling open a crate. "Oh!" he added, reaching in and pulling out a small, but very pretty urn. "Your urn, sir."

"Ah!" cried the mayor, running forward and taking the object. He held it in his arms like a child. "Oh, thank the goddesses..." Isaac, Garet and Ivan all just watched, waiting and listening.

As Samson opened another crate, his face twisted in an angered expression, lifting out a golden statue. "They stole

from the Sanctum!" Isaac himself felt a strong twinge of anger ripple through himself at this.

"Oh, they'll most certainly be punished," muttered the mayor, a very dangerous glint flashing in his eye. It wasn't long until Samson had opened yet another crate, producing... A very normal-looking staff. It had a good length to it, and appeared to be expertly carved with what appeared to be a crescent on its side on the tip. Isaac was reminded of Jenna's broken staff, and he felt another strong emotion hit him, but he pushed it to the back of his mind for now. "Oh, Ivan. That's yours, isn't it?" asked the Mayor, turning to the boy, who nodded silently, walking over to Samson and accepting the staff.

Once Ivan walked back to the other two, Isaac got a chance to see the staff up close. While it didn't have anything particularly blatant about it, like the blade Ivan had taken from the thieves' leader, Isaac thought there was *something* about the Shaman's Rod he couldn't quite place. "You'll be able to return it to Hammet now, right?" asked Gareth.

Ivan sighed. "I don't know if I'll be able to catch up to him before he reaches Lunpa. He's traveling on a caravan, after all. Not to mention Dodonpa won't miss an opportunity to take him..." The boy gripped the staff tightly, pulling a hard look upon his face and reaching up to tug on a lock of his hair that rested on his now shining forehead, still damp from the effort he'd gone through to fight the thief.

"I'm almost certain that he's been taken by now," said the mayor with a sad sigh, reaching out to place a wizened hand upon Ivan's shoulder. The boy looked up at the old man, who was still smiling kindly through his large white mustache. "But, you musn't get worked up. I'm also certain that Hammet is safe. Dodonpa will want a ransom from Kalay, so I

imagine he'll keep your master safe from harm for now." The corners of Ivan's mouth twitched before curling slowly upwards.

"Thank you," said Ivan as the mayor turned to Isaac and Gareth, who had been fairly quiet up to this point.

"You have my deepest gratitude," said the mayor, inclining his head to them. "I have the files you require, so before you go, come to my home and I'll give them to you." The mayor turned toward the doorway, though paused a moment, twirling his mustache again. "...And perhaps I could give you something else as well... Yes."

Once the mayor and Samson had left, Isaac and Gareth turned to Ivan, whose thumb and forefinger had closed around the lock of his hair again, Ivan let out a soft sigh and opened his eyes, lifting his head to look up at the ceiling. "I wish we could help you," said Gareth softly. "You look so depressed."

Ivan started, blinking and turning to Isaac and Gareth again, as if he'd forgotten they were there. "I-I just want to help my master, that's all... Even if he's been kidnapped, I at least have to try and help him." Isaac nodded, smiling to the smaller boy. "But... I can't ask you to help me... You two have a... Important mission, right?"

Gareth rubbed the middle of his forehead with a sigh. "Yeah... We have to find Felix and the others... Otherwise..."

"I saw, remember?" said Ivan, blushing slightly. "I'm sorry," he added, looking to Isaac, "my curiosity got the better of me, and I had to know before I left."

"So you'll be going now?" asked Isaac, waving off Ivan's apology with a shrug. His own curiosity had gotten the

better of him more times than he could count, so he couldn't exactly talk much. Ivan nodded, extending his hand toward his new friend.

"Yes. Isaac, Gareth. Thank you both. I suppose this is goodbye..." Isaac stared down at Ivan's hand, then shook his head, earning a rare blink from the smaller boy.

"Not goodbye," said Isaac, grasping Ivan's hand. "We'll see each other again sooner or later. Maybe once we're done with our mission, we can help you with yours, Ivan."

Ivan actually looked on the verge of tears, his bottom lip quivering slightly and he gulped, taking a deep breath to steady himself. Gareth shouldered his axe, smiling. "Th-thank you," stammered Ivan, looking between the two much taller boys, reaching up to tug on a lock of his hair again. They stood in silence for a few moments, Isaac unable to think of what else to say. Luckily, Ivan heaved out a heavy sigh, looking up at them again and nodding, turning away and walking toward the doorway. "I'll never forget this town's hospitality... Or your kindness. I wish you the best."

And then Ivan was gone. Isaac and Gareth stood in silence for a few moments longer before Gareth rolled his shoulder. "Well, I guess we'd better get moving, then," said Gareth.

Stepping through the front door of the mayor's house, Isaac and Gareth looked around. The mayor had cleaned up a bit, though the table of files and papers was still quite cluttered. The dining table, however, had the mayor's family urn resting in the middle as a centerpiece. There were also two young children sitting at it, looking up at the two boys curiously. "My grandchildren had been playing outside when you were here earlier," said the mayor, holding a scroll in his

hand. Isaac couldn't help but notice that the dining table had been set for five people. "I have some information on a lighthouse, though," he continued, opening the scroll. "There's a lighthouse up north, in the snowy region of Imil. It's a bit of a dangerous trek, however. You'll have to go through Goma Cavern, which is northeast of here, along the Goma Mountain Range, then go north from Bulibin, though it's still treacherous. It's autumn, you see. Summer is usually the best time for travel up there, but I doubt that will stop you two."

The mayor grinned, twirling his mustache. The mayor's daughter, a woman about the same age as Isaac's mother Dora, stepped forward, holding a small vial of golden liquid. "You two got back our urn, and everything else that was stolen," she said, bowing to them and holding out the vial. "Please take this. I imagine you'll need this more than we will."

Isaac stared agape at the golden liquid. "But... I can't accept that," he said. "You know how much those things are *worth*?"

The woman smiled, reaching out to take Isaac's hand and placed the vial firmly into his palm. "Just take it, please."

"What is that?" asked Garet, blinking at the tiny vial.

"Water of Life," said the mayor, leaning back slightly and nodding. "Like my daughter said, you'll likely put it to better use than we can, boys."

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" offered the woman, indicating the dumplings on the table. Though Garet's stomach grumbled audibly and Isaac felt like he hadn't eaten in weeks, he shook his head.

"We have to get moving. Don't worry too much about us." He turned to the mayor, giving him a respectful bow. "Thank you, sir. We'll get moving and-" As he turned, however, the woman held a small bundle out to him. "...You're quick," he said.

"I have twins," she replied, indicating the children at the table. "Be sure to eat the dumplings soon," she added as Isaac and Gareth turned to leave, the shorter of the two letting out a sigh.

Once they were outside, Isaac rubbed his eyes. "Counting it as an early birthday present for everything I get isn't gonna cut it for long, Gareth, and you know that. I hate getting things for free."

"Come on, Isaac," said Gareth, cuffing his friend around the shoulder. "We got the whole town their stuff back. I'd say we earned this stuff. We didn't get it for free."

Isaac looked over to his tall friend, and soon a small grin played across his face. "Yeah... You're right. Did that thief knock you in the head?" he teased. Gareth shoved Isaac playfully, laughing.

"I'll knock *you* in the head and see how you like it," said the Mars adept as he and Isaac stepped through the town, Gareth picking at the hole in his sleeve where the tip of the broken sword had cut through. "Hey, you know, we should probably get new vests before we leave."

Isaac looked down at his slashed vest, frowning. "...Yeah, that might be for the best. Hey, maybe we can get something a little better, too," said the Venus adept, and Gareth nodded, the boys walking towards a door set into the cliff wall, where a sign hung above it sporting a picture of a sword and shield to indicate a smithy. Stepping inside, the

boys looked around. It wasn't much different from the shop back at Vale: There were many weapons hanging on display behind two desks. In the back were a pair of furnaces, a large crate full of coal, and a pair of large hammers.

The men behind the desks looked up from their respective items, beaming at Isaac and Garet as they walked up. They were both quite bulky men, and looked to be brothers, both wearing a brown apron and a pair of overalls each. "There are the two heroes," said the taller of the two, who was bald save for a pair of mutton chops with connected mustache as he lifted a long sword, much like Isaac's own and set it on a pair of hooks on the wall.

Isaac felt his face begin to burn, and Garet patting him on the shoulder didn't help matters. "What can we do for you?" asked the younger man with a fuller head of hair and a bit of scruff on his chin, his green eyes twinkling as he polished a round, bronze shield.

"Uh, just a small thing," said Isaac, still blushing, as he pulled off his bag and set it down along with his sword so he could remove his vest, which had a long slash through the front. "Any chance that this could be repaired?" He set the green vest onto the desk and the armorer moved from his shield and looked it over.

"Hm," he mused. "Probably, but it'd probably just be cheaper to get a new one." The man indicated a rack near the door that had several sizes of traveling vests, all of different colors. Isaac and Garet moved over to the rack, the taller boy setting down his axe before running a hand over another shield, this one made of wood bordered with metal.

"Will you boys be heading out soon?" asked the weapon smith, who was watching them with a smile.

"Yes," replied Isaac, taking down a vest, this one the same green as his ruined one. "According to the mayor, we need to head up north-east, to Goma Cave."

"Are these shields all you have?" asked Gareth, who turned from the rack, lifting the wooden shield.

"Yep," said the armorer, not looking up from the bronze shield he was polishing. "This is the only shield that isn't made of wood, but it was commissioned by one of the townsfolk." The shield was lifted and carried to a box, before the man looked back to Gareth with a small, apologetic smile and a shrug. "Sorry. We've been low on materials for a few weeks, and that's not even accounting for the eruption." The men let out a heavy sigh as Isaac and Gareth exchanged looks. "The bridge to the south was destroyed by rocks falling from the sky, and the trade route from the north has been closed until conditions improve."

"The traders have always been slow," huffed the weapon smith, before shaking his head. "Anyway, you gonna buy that?" he asked, pointing at the vest Isaac was holding. "Since you two helped the town, we can give you a half-off discount, so it's twenty-five gold. Though if you'd also like that shield, I can throw that in for twenty more."

"Thanks, but-" Isaac was interrupted by Gareth nudging him with his elbow and smiling.

"It's not for free, so just take it." The taller boy winked at Isaac, who sighed. "Besides, you probably need the extra protection, heh."

"Might as well get yourself a shield, too," said Isaac as he picked up a shield for himself and carried it over to the desk.

As he reached into his pouch to start counting out coins, the armorer shook his head. "Nah, from what I can tell, he needs to use both hands for that axe of his. It wouldn't be as useful, then."

"Fair enough," muttered Isaac, shrugging and setting down forty-five coins before briefly pulling off his sword to change into his new vest. Once that was done, he slipped the strap of his sword back onto his back and slid the strap of the shield onto the hilt of his sword. "Thanks," said Isaac, and the men nodded before the two boys turned and left. "Guess it's time we headed north-east."

The mayor had been correct in that it had taken them nearly the entire rest of the day to reach the foot of the mountains. There were some cliffs, but what appeared to be paths wide enough for a caravan to travel along were built into it, all leading up to the mouth of a cave. A waterfall fed a river nearby. "Looks like this is it," said Garet, looking up at the mountains that loomed above them.

"Yeah," said Isaac, as they walked along the path. "This must be the trade route that's supposed to head to Vault from the north-east. I wonder why they're delayed." Once they'd reached the mouth, Isaac saw why. A large boulder, which he could only assume was the result of a landslide, rested in front of the mouth of the cave. Long, thick vines had grown and were holding it in place. "Hm."

The Venus adept lifted a hand, blue rings surrounding his body as, for the second time that day, a massive, ghostly white hand appeared, placing itself on the boulder. Isaac heaved, but unfortunately, the vines were much too strong. The boulder barely budged. "Having trouble?" asked Garet

as the hand disappeared and Isaac rolled one of his shoulders.

"It's those vines," said Isaac.

"Let me try," said the Mars adept, his hand starting glow a bright red. Isaac stepped out of the way as the larger boy heaved a fireball at the vines, with underwhelming results. The vines, while slightly scorched, refused to catch fire.

"Huh?"

"I guess the vines are taking water from the river," said Isaac, looking up at the darkening sky. "Ugh, it's too late to bother with this right now. Come on, let's set up camp for the night..."